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THE REJECTED STONE

CASTE AND CHRISTIANS

Paul de la Guerivière

UNTOUCHABILITY

Francis Parmar

CASTE DYNAMICS

Lancy Lobo

CASTE DISCRIMINATION

Mathew Kalathil

OUTSIDE THE GATE, SHARING THE INSULT

Samuel Rayan



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JEEVADHARA

The Living Christ

THE REJECTED STONE

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Kerala, India

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Editorial

Parmar and Kalathil are sharing with us their experience of caste and untouchability. Parmar's is personal experience; Kalathil's, a committed participant's. Both are warm and welcome.

Lobo and Gueriviere, as committed students of Indian reality, are attempting an analysis of the nature and dynamics of the caste system. Their insights are as precious as their brevity in dealing with an intricate problem. Gueriviere's probe reaches the reality of caste in the christian tradition, long ago and today, outside India and inside. It touches on the task of Jesus' disciples now. Rayan takes up and continues this meditation. It is continued in the search-light of Jesus' historical experiences and social options: his experience as a socio-religious reject; his option to be outcastes with the outcaste and for them.

We are brought face to face with a human situation, frightful, tragic, horrendous, criminal, and sad. And we are confronted by a divinity who has chosen to be poor and outcaste and touchable to untouchables. The untouchables have no problem. Their path of struggle is clear. The rest of us are in a dilemma. We have to decide. It is the parting of the ways.

It is a socio-economic option, to be sure. But it is a spiritual option as well. We cannot have both God and mammon. It is particularly hard for the high caste people of pure-white karma to have to watch their fig-leaf wither and fall off their atheism. But such exposure to the truth about ourselves can be the beginning of freedom and wholeness. It will make us vulnerable, human, crucifiable; and resurrectable.

Caste has been called the "world's oldest form of apartheid". What is the real quarrel between our country and South Africa? Which is pot and which is kettle?

As a nation our unity and freedom are problematic. We are fragmented into affluent, rich, poor, destitute and bonded classes. We are broken up into numberless castes and sub-castes and casteless groups. The two systems of fragment-

ation and domination (divide and rule) correspond to, interlock and reinforce each other. The class basis of caste structure will have to be taken seriously, as well as the autonomy caste acquires once it has emerged as a superstructure and operated for long as a developed mechanism.

Campaigns against caste and untouchability from within traditional Indian society and Indian religion have been without number. They have been fought from ancient times to our days; from the times of the Buddha and beyond to the days of Gandhi and beyond. The failure of all of them show that more is needed than formal denunciations, idealist stances, and liberal sentiments, and even religious deductions including those made in this volume. Fundamental changes are required in the material basis of life, in the objective structuring of this basis, in the relations of property and production and in the distribution of social power. Action is needed at the level of 'the slime of the earth' with which we are made day by day.

Caste has infected everything and everybody, christians not excluded. It is a complex, social, psychological, religious, emotional, irrational, economic, political, cultural, racial, subtle-brutal, corrosive reality, extremely hard to tackle. Hence the perennial combat against it, the unfailing failure of the campaigns, and the urgent need now of radical measures.

In the context of Kerala's caste complexities, Swami Vivekananda is said to have described Kerala as a mad-house. Since then much of the madness has been cured, thanks mainly to Sri Narayana Guru, the ezhava community and the leftist movements. To the churches too? The role they have played is unclear. And now it seems that there is in Kerala a clergy-led attempt to revive caste feelings and inject into people who do not care the myth of upper caste descent. The infection of many other churches has never been a secret. This is but part of a general recrudescence of caste and caste violence in the country. This is no step towards finer humanity or god's reign. We are therefore concerned.

Caste and Christians

Caste is what makes Indian society specifically different from any other society. The hope that caste and its dehumanising manifestations would disappear as India enters the process of development and modernisation has been belied by facts. The social worker organizing people in villages and slums, the development expert assessing the social repercussions of economic policies, the political worker seeking to foster a new consciousness among the people, the village teacher struggling to change mentalities that have been moulded by centuries of tradition, the religious leader cherishing dreams of new communities where genuine brotherhood will be a reality and, above all, the victims of the caste system themselves are daily discovering to their dismay the power of caste and the strength of its grip over individuals and institutions.

There is indeed hardly an aspect of Indian life — economic, political, social or cultural — that is not deeply marked by caste. And yet few dare to unmask and confront the problem in its stark reality. "Integration", "unity in diversity", "tolerance", "peaceful co-existence" and other such slogans are used to explain away or cover up realities which are, perhaps, too harsh to face. Of late, however, the victims of the system have forced upon society issues which social workers, planners, politicians, educators and religious leaders had so far preferred to evade. Caste, with its long history of abject slavery and heartless exploitation, is today being unmasked and its alibis are being set aside. The inherent violence of the system, hidden for centuries through successful oppression and ideological domination of thought, is erupting in to the open. The enormous problem of caste is imposing itself upon the conscience of the nation.

I. Oppression

This paper intends to reflect on some events of the recent past, which are indicative of the new struggle of the

poor to liberate themselves from the exploitation of the rich and powerful. Many of the facts have come to us through sharing with those working in the villages, organising people; or through the news distributed by the mass media. If one knows how to listen and to look around, one may suddenly discover the magnitude of the struggle which is fast developing in the country. If we were to indicate with a dot on the map of India each of the villages or localities where the struggle is on, the entire map would be covered with dots.

We shall first enumerate some instances of this struggle and then we shall reflect on them in the light of Jesus' life.

We recall here but a few names of villages which have appeared in the news in the past one year or so.

At *Belchi* (Madhyapradesh) less than two years ago, eight landless labourers and three poor sonars were shot by Kurmi landlords and thrown into the fire, some of them still alive. The victims included a 12 year - old boy who jumped out of the fire several times and each time was pushed back into the flames till he perished. All this, because the labourers had the audacity to organise themselves and lay claim to their dignity and to just wages. *Belchi* was soon followed by *Pathadda*, in Bhagalpur district (Bihar). There, the Yadava landlords decided to punish the labourers who refused to work for them for pitiably low wages. They sent their boys with armed men who surrounded the entire area and beat everyone in the colony including old men, women and children. After the first round of beating, thirty of them, including women, were taken to the village school, given another round of beating and then locked up in a small room for a whole day without even water being given. In the evening they were let off, except three who were considered to be the leaders. Ropes were tied round their waste and all three were then paraded through the village streets, the landlords' youth holding the other end of the rope. The district magistrate reached the village only three days later. *Pantnagar* will not be soon forgotten. The farm workers of the Agricultural University at Pantnagar were peacefully marching to the administrative building to submit a memorandum to the authorities. It was then that the Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) fired on them from close

range. Several were killed. The PAC men began a hunt for workers in their living quarters. All the dead and the injured were dragged to a sugarcane field and burnt. The University farm workers' wages were very low. They were agitating for wage increase which the University authorities consistently refused at the behest of the landlords in the region. The landlords feared that any wage increase in the University farm would have its impact in the surrounding areas and they would have to pay more to their own workers. It should be remembered that most of the workers thus murdered or victimised belonged to the Harijan community. In Punjab the Chief Minister admitted in the Vidhan Sabha that forty five Harijans were killed in the state between June 1977 and February 1978.

In a well documented article entitled "Born to Misery", the magazine *India today* (October 1-15, 1978) published the following figures compiled from official sources :

STATES	<i>Cases of atrocities (January 1-July 31, 1978)</i>			
	Registered cases of murder		of rape	
Uttar Pradesh	89	94
Madhya Pradesh	36	64
Bihar	41	58
Gujarat	26	6
Rajasthan	39	39
Maharashtra	7	14
Haryana	4	8
Others	21	23
Total			263	306

These events took place mostly in the North; but the South has its share too. The "Tarkunde Report" on violation of civil rights in *Andhra Pradesh* has brought out the atrocities committed against those who dared to take sides with the oppressed. We quote here only one passage from the report. It deals with the revenge of the police on Harijans: "A reign of terror was unleashed by the police on the surrounding villages, on the poor [in Cherukapali area]. The Harijans were beaten and hounded out like cattle, their homes were destroyed, their grain was scattered and their crops ruined. Hundreds

of people — poor — lost everything and fled from their villages and fields in fear, to eke out a living as coolies in other places” (Civil Rights - Tarkunde - Committee Report, Hyderabad, May 1977).

The Journal *Economic and Political Weekly* (Nov 18, 1978) describes the situation prevailing in the district of Adilabad: “A cursory glance at the still prevailing social customs alone is sufficient to understand the degree of feudal exploitation in this region ... the social norms of behaviour which the landlord imposes have to be scrupulously followed, whereby a peasant cannot wear white clothes, he cannot wear chappals in the presence of the landlord, and cannot send his children to school. In many villages of this area a girl still has to be sent to the landlord to satisfy his amorous desires, as soon as she attains maturity...” (EPW, Nov. 18, 1978). The same article describes what happens when the poor try to organise themselves in order to gain their freedom and dignity. “In Chinnamettapalli village (Metappalli taluka), the youth activists came to organise the *sangham*. The landlord, aided by his battery of goondas, raided the houses of peasants, ransacking 15 houses and kidnapping ten activists. The landlord, a very influential figure in the area, is the secretary of the District Congress Committee (Swaran Singh), and the president of the cooperative bank. By next morning, on December 15, a thousand strong peasant demonstration surrounded the *gadhi*, demanding the release of the activists. The landlord, along with his nephew (another landlord of Bernapalli village), went upstairs and opened fire on the peasants. Though the police were present they did not prevent them, and as a consequence, 11 peasants were injured... this incident triggered off a wave of protests, demonstrations and meetings. Subsequently in Lotunuru village (Jagityala taluka) the police opened fire, as a result of which one peasant, Pochayya, was killed and eight injured” (EPW, Nov. 18, 1978).

If people in their struggle often meet with set back they also have their success. In Sirisilla taluka, the peasant organisations, the Ryot Coolie Sangham; first sprang up in Nimmapalli village where the peasants first stopped giving bribes. Slowly the movement spread to the entire taluka inviting the

wrath of the landlords and the police. The increasing strength of the movement can be inferred from the fact that as many as 700 peasants were implicated in 14 cases in this particular taluka alone. Not unexpectedly, on October 20, the Government of Andhra Pradesh notified Siricilla and Jagityala taluka as "disturbed areas". It is perhaps in this last taluka (Jagityala) that the people's movement gathered strength and was able to register substantial victory over the oppressors. "In Jagityala taluka the sangams have given a call for the take-over of public lands illegally occupied by the landlords. They have also taken up the demand for increase in wages, which are below the minimum wage prescribed by law in most cases, and for the repayment of bribes taken during Emergency. In Maddunuru village alone the sanghams have distributed several tons of woods illegally held up by the landlords. This was followed by an impressive procession of 100 cart-loads of wood with hundreds of peasants. Simultaneously Sanghams also started functioning in Manthani, Pedapalli, Mettapalli and Huzurabad talukas of Karimmagar district" (Indian Express, Nov. 25, 1978)

Such are the facts. Instances of this type could be multiplied almost without end. The number of villages that have not yet experienced the struggle in one form or another is dwindling. We then have a situation in which those who have been the victims of oppression and exploitation for centuries together are beginning to assert themselves. They have entered the struggle for liberation: liberation from social discrimination, economic exploitation, political oppression. In their struggle they encounter ruthless repression by the powerful, who do not hesitate to use all the machinery of the state: the police, the administration, the judiciary. Indeed all the mighty have come together to crush the poor in their attempts at liberation.

II. Mechanics

Scholars tell us that caste has, all along Indian history, been marked by a process of severe exploitation of the producers of wealth by the high castes. Hindu civilization, as we know it, has been largely built on the exploitation of the

outcast and of his work by dominant castes. This was made possible by a caste culture sustaining the caste system. In the caste culture religion played a key role by legitimizing the social system. It was a system capable of producing opposites at the same time: on the one hand it produced such a "refined" culture as the brahminic one, and such wealth as is found in the palaces of former princes and of high caste high class families; and on the other hand, it produced such vast misery and profound degradation as can be found in the segregated colonies of Harijans. One is led to think that such a system necessarily harbours at its core an inbuilt violence, however well concealed it might be, through clever use of power and ideological manipulation.

Seeing the vast population of our villages who, more than others, have been the victims of the caste system through a long process of "mystification", one recalls Engels' words: "A peasant people have to be cheated for centuries before they become aware of their own experience." But how do they finally become aware? And what happens when they do become aware of their experience? In order to answer these questions in the Indian context we have to make some further probing into the caste system.

Many people understand the caste system as a system primarily of division of labour according to the various functions that need to be performed in and for society. This is true. But caste is something more. The system functions both as a relation of production and as an ideology. As a relation of production, the caste system operates as an extremely effective method of economic exploitation. The system determines and defines the relation of each caste and of the outcasts to the means of production and subsistence. A hierarchy of castes is thus firmly established which in each region would correspond to class hierarchy. The group, the class, that captures economic power also acquires political and social power, and so strengthens its position in the double hierarchy. This was understood by a group of activists who, after analysing a conflict situation in a rural area, wrote: "Caste controls the access of groups and individuals to the conditions of

production and to resources... it also controls access to the surplus."

As an ideology caste is no less efficient. Let us quote the activists again: "The legitimacy of class / caste structure is provided by the brahminical world view, i. e., Dharma and Karma... Caste and religion are used to perpetuate a particular class structure. Caste persists as a part of feudal ideology. Even though the relations of production may be undergoing change, the ideological superstructure takes time to change. The ruling class tries its utmost to see that no ideological change takes place because the stagnation helps them to maintain their control... One of the latent functions of the caste system has been to prevent the formation of consciousness and struggle on class lines."

No wonder then that it has taken centuries for the oppressed and exploited castes in the villages of India to "become aware of their own experience". But now a new awareness is emerging. It finds expression both in the violent incidents we have described and in a new literature. A. S. Rajan, a Dalit poet, sings:

Mahatmas have come
Mahatmas have gone
But the sufferings have not gone.
The sufferings won't go
Until the exploited aware and rise
To break the shackle and the bondage.

(quoted by V. T. Rajshekhar Shetty, in *Dalit Movement in Karnataka* p. 13)

Today, the system which for centuries had regulated the access of individuals and groups to productive resources, wealth and social position is being challenged from within. It is being challenged by those who, through their hard work, had made the greatest contribution to the creation of this wealth and culture but who through ideological manipulation had been systematically excluded from it. The inbuilt violence of such a system concealed and contained for centuries is erupting in the process. It is an historical process which once

started cannot be stopped. The shackle must be broken. The greater the resistance of the upper castes to the movement of liberation from bondage, the greater too the likely violence. We can reduce the violence only by understanding the process. Some sociologists have expressed the opinion that caste may have a very important role to play in the evolution of the new socio-economic and political structures which the country is groping for. Thus, for instance, Prof. Yogendra Singh, dean of the school of social sciences at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, writes: "It is quite possible that societies that are in the traditional stage of the modernization process might well be using traditional collectivities such as caste, family and other communal group identities for political participation. Studies conducted in India by social scientists do confirm this phenomenon." (Yogendra Singh: *Essays on Modernization in India* Manohar, Delhi, 1978, p. 58).

In this context, a study of caste associations will show that while some do not achieve much, a few have built themselves up into effective and powerful agencies for modern education and for political participation. A striking example in Tamilnadu would be the Vanniyar and Nadar Associations. It is also true that caste organizations can accelerate class conflicts. The 'disturbances' that have accompanied the legislation in various states concerning "reservation" is a pointer in this direction (for details about caste and caste associations see David G. Mandelbaum: *Society in India*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1972.)

III. Christians

Could Christians draw a few conclusions from what has been said so far? If history can teach us any lesson, it is that Christians, on the whole, and the institutional church in particular, have been very slow in understanding the great social issues that confronted the societies in which they lived. To equip ourselves to learn from our situation in India, it is useful to travel back in Christian history and see what happened when churches came up face to face with social issues. A better understanding of the past can help us face critically and constructively the problems of our own society.

One of the basic issues which Christians have had to confront through the centuries is slavery. From the beginning of Christianity till almost the seventeenth century, the institution of slavery was accepted as a given factor in the order of human affairs. From St Paul onwards, Christians exhorted both slaves and slave holders to virtuous Christian living just as today they would exhort landlords and landless laborers, high castes and untouchables to their respective 'duties'. The institution of slavery was not questioned. Within that institution the slave and the slave holder had to 'become better' and more 'godfearing' without questioning the justice of the state of either of them. It is given not to religious movements but to movements with a definite secular thrust to question the existing social relationships. For such movements it is no longer a question of 'improving' individuals within the system but of radically transforming the system itself.

It is taken for granted in many Christian circles that Christianity has been mainly instrumental in abolishing slavery. That is a myth. Long after the revolt of the slaves of the Roman Empire, the church continued to advocate and practise slavery. True that in some specific contexts the church denounced the sale of slaves, like the sale of Christian captives to Moslems. At the same time it permitted the enslavement of Moslems and of nonchristian Europeans. Will Durant records that "thousands of captured slaves and Saracens were distributed among monasteries, and slavery on church lands and papal estates continued well after the eleventh century. Canon Law sometimes estimated the wealth of the church's land in slaves rather than in money" (Will Durant: *The Age of Faith*, p. 554). Not only bishops but religious orders too had their wealth of slaves. Jesuits in Goa thought slaves were necessary "since servant boys were often too weak and as they grew up they married and left", and since "all other religious orders kept some slaves" (cf Ignis, Sept-Oct. 1975, p. 10). The Jesuit General counselled moderation and concern for justice to slaves, Not so Pope Nicholas V who authorised (!) the king of Portugal to invade, conquer, expel, reduce to slavery and dispossess for ever all saracens, pagans and infidels, and appropriate their kingdoms and possession

for himself and his successors (cf the Bull quoted by F. Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, TPI, Bangalore, 1974, p. 116). This was in the sixteenth century. But slavery has been practised among Christians even in the second half of the last century. In the USA it was officially abolished only in 1866.

This does not however mean that there have not been individual Christians and Christian groups with greater critical awareness of the injustice of the situation. But their awareness was very much the result of developments which had taken place in the 'secular' world. Thus it was after the revolutionary war in America that the Methodist and Baptist churches, responding to the ethos of freedom, took radical positions against slavery. In more recent times Vatican II seems to have made an attempt at remedying a situation in which "the view of salvation was largely 'spiritual' and sometimes 'rational', but usually separated from the concrete struggle of freedom in this world". A jesuit theologian Richard A. Roach traces movements and influences that have contributed to a change of attitude, if not of values. He writes: "Vatican II recognized our responsibility for the socio economic and political structures which determine the pattern of distributive justice or injustice. With this recognition along with its endorsement of a civil expression of freedom the Council embraced positions hammered out by the Deists and Atheists of 1776 and 1789. When the Council added to these teachings a preference for a greater material equality, it entered even the territory formerly occupied almost exclusively by the militant atheists of 1917 and the following years. In short by explicitly recognizing our responsibility for social structures, the Council requires that Catholics face enormous social problems which have unusual historical and theoretical roots as part of their service of faith" (Richard A. Roach: "Tridentine Justification and Justice" in *The Faith that does Justice* (ed John C. Haughey). Woodstock Theological Centre, New York, 1977, p. 196).

Among the enormous problems "which have unusual historical and theoretical roots" one can certainly count the problem of caste and untouchability. We have to face it. In

doing so, could we have some guidance and inspiration from Jesus and the example of his life?

IV. Challenges

The first thing that strikes us is the many similarities we find between the society in which Jesus lived and our own society. After a detailed description of the society in the midst of which Jesus spent his life, Joseph Klausner concludes: "Palestine thus came to possess a class of poor, destitute and unemployed landless peasants, side by side with a class of wealthy farmers, great landed proprietors and rich bankers. The former waxed poorer and poorer, sinking into mendicancy, crushed and depressed, hoping for miracles, filling the streets of towns and villages bith beggary; outcasts, haunting the caves and desert places and the rocks and crevices of the mountains" (Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 189). The people were burdened with all kinds of taxes. The Romans took a large share. Some of these taxes proved particularly burdensome; for instance, the "frontier tax": "Every city was a frontier in itself and Pliny tells us how 'at every stopping place, by land and by sea, some tax was levied', with the result that foods were sold in the Roman Market at a hundred times higher cost than at the place of their origin or manufacture. . Such taxes impoverished the people and made them full of impotent rage against the 'despotic kingdom' which through its many minions, drained their blood" (Ibid. p. 188). Not so long ago, India did know similar situations and continues to suffer from its after effects. Inequality and exploitation were some of the characteristics of Jesus' society.

The reader is certainly aware of the power structure that existed in the society in which Jesus lived. At the top there was the Procurator residing in Caesarea and coming to Jerusalem only on big feasts. He appointed the High Priest from one of four families. The high priest was the head of the temple *and* of the state. Roman domination was exercised through intermediaries recruited from among the dominating classes and the Romanized officials. A series of intermediary officials (bureaucracy) were directly appointed from the elders of the Sanhedrin (upper council) and from the great families.

The Sanhedrin was composed of priests, scribes or doctors of the law and elders of the people. Members had to be of pure Jewish blood. The council had both political and juridical authority. In it the Sadducees represented the interests of the Aristocracy. They were allied with the Romans to keep their position of power. The Pharisees represented the interest of the upper middle class. They were the nationalists. The synagogue was their centre of power. The publicans were recruited from the lower levels of society and had the responsibility of gathering the taxes. The temple was the central institution, the centre of political power, the centre of the economy of the country, the stock exchange, the greatest employer. The racial factor was important and acute distinction between pure Jews and impure Jews was strictly observed. Those who had broken religious taboos were excluded from society.

The rural society, in which Jesus moved most of the time, was composed of a few big landlords, a majority of small holders, labourers, artisans. In some areas, commonly owned land persisted. By and large, a majority of the people were poor, and were exploited by the merchants and the usurers.

The urban society was composed of Artisans, merchants for international commerce (they had slaves), small merchants, marginal subproletariate (slaves, beggars, all groups of people declared outcast) and middle class.

Such was the society in which Jesus lived. It offers quite a few similarities with today's Indian society. What then was the attitude of Jesus towards his own society, towards the rich and the powerful of his own days? towards the poor, the exploited, the outcast?

The dominant and striking feature of Jesus' life is the basic option he made for the poor. In a society in which the rich and the politically powerful kept the people in subjugation, Jesus opted to live with the poor, with the exploited and the outcasts. He identified himself with them. During his whole life he surrounds himself with people, who, in the eyes of the rich and the powerful, belonged to the lower strata. What is more, he looks at society, events and persons, from the

point of view of the poor. His language, the comparisons he uses are all from the world of the simple and poor people. And the poor recognise Him as their own. So much so that they wanted to make Him their leader something which indeed the mighty of the establishment could hardly tolerate.

Because of his clear options, He came into conflict with the powerful of his days, the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the High Priest and the Sanhedrin. He challenged the powerful not alone, but from the midst of and surrounded by the very people whom the mighty had always despised and kept in contempt. By so doing, Jesus strengthened the poor, those who had only received contempt and abuses from the rich. He taught them not to be afraid of the mighty. After His death, those whom He had trained would show themselves capable of confronting the officials and the powerful, and of strengthening the first Christians to be fearless in witnessing to Jesus.

In this continual confrontation of Jesus with the Pharisees and other officials, there is a whole process of education of the poor, and the outcasts through which they discover their own dignity and perceive the hollowness of the so called leaders. An entire process of liberation is initiated. The authorities, who were not fools, understood perfectly well what was going on and felt directly threatened. Alarmed at the ascendancy which Jesus gained among the people they decided to do away with Him. A person who moves so closely with the people and makes them see the game played by the leaders and the cause of their own situation in society is dangerous. He is a threat to the establishment. He must be killed. A case against him must be concocted. The police and the officials will find a way.

Is this not what is being re enacted all over the country? The facts which we have alluded to in the first pages seem to indicate that it is so. Yet, one could ask who are those who, like Jesus, take risks for the liberation of the poor and of the oppressed? The Church with all its institutions? Or those, Christians and non Christians alike, whom the "official church" looks at with suspicion, if not with hosti-

lity? How long will it take for the Church to rediscover the core of the message of Jesus which is one of liberation of the poor? An African leader once said that if the Church fails to rediscover this core of the message of Jesus, "it will become irrelevant and will die and will deserve to die". The day when the Church rediscovered the message of Jesus, it will regain its *raison d'être* and will become a new sign of hope to many in search of such a sign. To help the Church to rediscover this core of Jesus' message is a difficult but urgent task to which Christians are called.

In the first place we have to be conscious of the problems involved in all their complexity. We must know there are no easy solutions, and yet solutions must be sought and caste overcome. Could the exploiter, for instance, (be he a landlord, a high caste person, a money-lender, or all three in one) co-exist in love with the exploited (be he a "low" caste or a Harijan), and constitute one community, the community of the church? Some Christian churches in the past (like the US Methodist church in the 1780s) ruled that a slaveholder could not be a member of the Christian community unless he gave up all dealings in slavery, which the church considered to be "contrary to the laws of God, man and nature, and hurtful to society" (cited in 'The Social Context of Theology' by James Cone in *Doing Theology Today* edited by Choan-Seng Song, Madras, 1976, p. 28). In the Indian context of 1980s, if a landlord or high caste person or high born group practise caste discrimination and thus violate norms of justice, could he or they continue to be part of the Christian community?

More basically, could the institutional violence of the oppressor which we described earlier in the article, and the survival counter-violence of the oppressed be treated equally, equally condemned? Confronted with this problem, a theologian recently wrote: "Such an assumption effectively castrates the church, rendering it impotent to take side with the victims against the violator" (Gary MacEoin: "The Church of

the Poor?" in *Cross-Currents*, vol xxviii, no. 1). If a group of young activists enters a cemetery and breaks down the wall that keeps Harijans segregated even after death — this did happen in an important town in Tamilnadu — what should be the reaction or response of the religious leaders and of the community? Should they respect the claims of the activists and of the gospel or yield to the pressure of the powerful?

Has not the enormous injustice which is at the heart of the caste system been conveniently forgotten in the name of peaceful co-existence and in the name of the unity of the church community? But where is unity if the community tolerates within itself such poisonous discrimination and divisive attitudes and practices? In such cases would not the use of the word "community" amount to a lie? And would not the very concept of brotherhood and fellowship, which cannot exist without justice, be falsified?

Were we to probe some of these questions a bit more we would have to ask: who indeed are the loudest advocates of "unity in diversity", "integration" and "peaceful co-existence"? The victims of the system whose huts are set on fire, whose relatives are killed or raped, whose everyday existence is itself an ordeal and a process of dehumanisation? Or rather those who benefit by the "stability" and the "order" of the system and its undisturbed continuance? As an institution, where does the Church stand in all this? How does it relate to the liberation movements which, all over the country, are working to restore their dignity to millions of men and women who have been crushed and humiliated for centuries together by the powerful upper rungs of the caste hierarchy?

These are some of the questions the Church will have to answer in the near future, even now, if it wants to remain faithful to the message it has from Christ who did not hesitate to take sides with the poor, with those crushed under socio-religious and religio political institutions which were in many ways similar to ours. Is it possible for the church to learn from a word of one of the bitterest critics of religion in the last century, who said, "It is men that change circumstances and the educator himself needs educating"? Should the church agree to listen and learn, then certainly there is hope for the morrow for the many.

Untouchability

Personal reminiscences

I come from the Wankar caste. The Wankars are weavers by hereditary profession, and are regarded as Dhed or untouchable. In Gujarati, Dhed is a derogatory word, almost a term of abuse. Wankars rank above other untouchable castes like Chamars and Bhangis. A part of this group became christian at the time of the great famine at the turn of the century. My great-grandfather was the first in the family to be converted to Catholicism. My father left the village ghetto of the Wankar untouchables at the age of fourteen and joined a Methodist ghetto of the town settlement where a systematic effort was made to get rid of all caste feelings. I remember considering our sweeper-woman and all the Bhangis as low because they carried the night soil on their head. A couple of months ago, however, I was pleasantly surprised to see myself shaking hands with the Bhangis in my home-town, the same people whom as a child I was keeping at a safe distance. Barring this sort of discrimination born of a repulsion to what was felt as dirty, I do not remembr any caste restrictions in my early childhood.

But as I grew up, I began to experience the reality of caste and the consequences of being an untouchable. Till then even religionwise, I was quite proud of myself. I had the best religion; the religion of the Protestants around was inferior; it was a Christianity of dissenters; and of course the Hindus were all idolators. In my maternal uncle's village we were asked to take detour and not a short-cut through a field because the field belonged to a caste man. My aunt pleaded humbly, meekly, in the submissive tone of an underdog, pointing out that we were city people. In the end she could take us through the field. But she and we with her felt insulted. I could see no reason for the harsh treatment meted out to us. I had not yet learned to interiorise the system.

On another occasion we were in a small town hospital where I noticed a couple of ladies holding their sari-trips tight and together, and walking past us, asking us to walk at a distance lest perchance our clothes might brush against theirs and contaminate them. Once in a moving train an elderly man asked for some water to drink. As my brother-in-law offered him some, he asked what 'naat' (caste) we belonged to. When he heard that we were Christians he refused to accept the drink from us. For him as for many others Christians are untouchables. I also noticed as a young boy that some of my cousins had changed their surnames. In Gujarat surnames indicate people's caste. I could not see the reason behind such change and yet I began to notice a feeling slowly creeping upon me of being different from some other people, of being somehow inferior. Often I used to wonder where I got this feeling from. The incidents mentioned above must have affected me deeply; I remember them so vividly. Whenever I happen to pass through those places the memory revives with great intensity. I almost relive those childhood moments.

I have suffered immensely on account of this. I have felt uneasy to declare myself a christian. Christian in Gujarat means a low caste person. When I identified myself as a Christian I spoke English. I avoided speaking my language and sought to pass myself off as a non-Gujarati. Till very recently when asked about my caste I described myself as a Gujarati Christian, never as a Wankar. I have often been reluctant to start or carry on a conversion for fear of possible queries about my caste. The moment that particular question was put to me, I used to feel a chill running through my being, and was always at a loss for an answer. At the level of the head I was quite convinced of the equality of all men and women before God. I was sure of the meaninglessness of caste and its hierarchical order. I was clear in my mind that owning up my social background could not hurt in the least. But at the level of the heart there always lurked a deep fear of being rejected, of being counted worthless. In this conflict between head and heart, the heart usually won. Trying to avoid identifying myself as a Wankar meant that I had interiorised the

system and had begun to see myself as really low. I am not fully liberated from the tentacles of the system though I am struggling to be free and have achieved quite a lot.

This is not my personal experience alone. A senior Spanish priest of Gujarat, while studying in Bombay, was working among the Gujarati Christian community there. Once he took along with him a visiting Gujarati Jesuit seminarian, presuming that the young man would be able to communicate better with the people. To the priest's amazement, however, the young man spoke only in English, and that to his companion alone. He did not have a single word for the people. I know a Gujarati priest, very successful in his ministry in a school where practically all the students are high caste, presenting himself always as a Patel convert. I have seen Gujarati Jesuits talking to each other in English, thus becoming aligned with upper castes or non-Gujaratis. Among them Gujarati words often get mispronounced and sound foreign. Some pretend they do not know the Gujarati equivalents of some English words. I think I understand these things. I believe they are not quite deliberate choices but product of the subconscious. But they do reveal deep-seated feelings of inferiority and fear.

All this goes to show how deep this problem is. It is not true today that the problem has been ignored. Various approaches have been tried. The earliest attempts were those of the Protestant and Catholic missionaries. Though they differed at the surface level, basically their approaches were identical.

Missionary approaches

A. Protestants

The Protestant approach was to accept the system as it stood; or so it seems. They organised converts into a separate ghetto, and promoted among them the feel of being different from the rest of men. Since such a method implied great financial and organisational investment, the missionaries had to concentrate on a select few. A minority was taken off from their rural, familiar surroundings, organised into separate

groups in cities or towns where they were not known. The settlement was made comparatively self sufficient with primary schools, boarding houses, hospitals of a high standard, all staffed by mission-minded persons, Indian and foreign, and centred around the parish church. The more talented among the select few were given higher, professional training. The converts got rid of their caste names and convinced themselves that they were now liberated from the shackles of caste. The reality of caste was not even mentioned in the hearing of children. Since these ghettos were economically self-sufficient, they did not have to fall at the feet of anybody to beg for their bread. A certain measure of self-respect was thus induced. The group was proud, in the good sense, of itself and of its religion. They had little hesitation in declaring themselves Christians. Yet I remember how, on one occasion, in a cotton mill where a Protestant boy and I were working, a caste boy called us 'dheds' and how that led to a serious quarrel. It was clear that deep down even Protestants acknowledged the caste hierarchy and suffered from being considered low and Dhed.

This is as far as the selected few are concerned. But the plight of the simple villagers is miserable. They are held in contempt by the caste people. Despite their change of religion, they are still identified as untouchables and treated as such. During the recent anti reservation stir in Gujarat, on 20th February, some 27 houses were burnt down in a village, all belonging to Christians. Religion had made no difference except on Government records. Even their fellow caste men treat them at times as inferior to themselves for deserting the religion and society of their ancestors. Interestingly enough, tribals who become Christians are also looked upon as untouchables for adhering to the religion of untouchables. Such too is the plight of any caste man who dares to accept the Christian faith. There is the famous case of Manishankar Ratnaji Bhatt, a renowned Gujarati poet who became a Christian but was forced back into Hinduism by social and psychological persecutions and pressures. That this was the situation in our neighboring Maharashtra too is borne out by the Reminiscences of the wife of Narayan Vaman Tilak. Acceptance of

Christianity made these people too untouchables even to their close relatives.

There is still another angle to the situation. In general the Christians living in the city, seeing the miserable plight of their brothers in the villages, refuse to recognize and acknowledge any connections with them. The feeling of inferiority seems rather to have been suppressed in these city dwellers than eliminated. It comes off now as a superiority feeling in regard to others, even Christians, who are less fortunate than themselves. And their own reaction to being called low is swift and sharp. Thus this method, though externally successful, has only healed the symptoms, covered up the wounds, but left the malady wholly untouched. There remains the implicit acceptance of the unchristian vision and value of a hierarchy of human beings.

B. Catholics

The catholic missionary approach differed from this, but only in regard to the starting point. The majority of catholics remained in the rural areas and were looked down upon by the higher castes just as they were before their conversion. Their caste customs and patterns of marriage alliances underwent no change. Primary education was organised on a vast scale. But that did not help change the poor self-image the people had since their socio-economic situation continued unaltered. For their daily bread they still had to depend heavily on the upper castes. It was only a small number of Catholics that left the village for towns and cities where they formed ghettos of their own.

It would be incorrect to say that the Catholic missionaries were insensitive to the problem. But the means they adopted were largely psychological without any strong economic infra-structure to give them support. Hence their attempts did not prove useful. The Wankar Christians were asked to call themselves "Deshi-Khristi" or Indian Christians and not Wankars for they were supposed to be out of the caste system. This attempt to convince oneself and others that the Christian

group did not belong to the system succeeded even less than the protestant approach. It even worked to their disadvantage since the Government picked up the christian stance and on its basis denied to converts the benefits of schemes meant for the uplift of Scheduled castes. Christians recognise no social distinctions of caste, and therefore, argued the Government, they do not come within the range of the schemes. At first this was found acceptable to the christians themselves since it recognized their higher social status. Not to accept the special benefits was considered a mark of genuine faith. The rejection of benefit schemes shows that most people were more anxious to get rid of the social stigma than to gain economic advantages. Of course, the missionary was there to make up in some measure for the economic loss. But in time the masses in the villages began to realize that the non-christian sector of their caste was progressing and overtaking them because of the aid programmes, while the christians had both to do without the benefits and to endure treatment meted out to untouchables. Hence in backward areas many christians gave up their faith or its external practices, produced documents stating they were Hindu Wankars and preferred to get the economic benefits of Government schemes. It was those who were economically worst off in the more backward villages that thus quitted. Those who had better economic support and those who preferred the psychological advantage of being out of the caste system continued in the faith.

Recent efforts

a. One of the recent efforts is to insist with the Government that change in religious convictions and affiliation does not by itself change people's social status or economic conditions. Christians therefore who come from the lower castes must get all benefits the Constitution gives to depressed castes and classes. This move is led by the Bishop of Ahmedabad, representing the Catholic Bishops Conference of India. In the wake of it the Gujarat Government did appoint a commission called the Bakshi Panch in 1972 to study the situation. The commission's report submitted in 1976 admits that the Wankar christian community, constituted out of persons who were

originally harijan weavers, "resemble the class of harijan weavers in almost all respects of social life" and are treated in the villages as harijans. The Report goes on to point out that the economic condition of the Wankar christians has not improved, that many of them are in debt, that all of them suffer from "almost all the disadvantages of the Scheduled caste". The Government is prepared to act upon this report. A catholic layman, who is also a local political leader, is taking steps to organise the people to claim and utilize for their uplift the benefits the Constitution grants them. With the support of the clergy he has been doing a great deal of work in the villages.

From the simple villager's point of view this looks attractive. But it runs the risk of an implicit acceptance of the caste system, a natural hierarchy of human beings, a concept the christian cannot subscribe to. The hope is that once the economic and educational situation of the group is bettered, caste feelings will go and there will be some changes in the social set up. There may be something in this hope but to this day no such change has occurred as far as the economically well-placed christian Wankars are concerned. Maybe, this is due to the negligible numerical strength of this group, there being only some 200 of them. But some such changes have come about within the Patel community of Gujarat. Once they were comparatively low in social rank, but their status has altered with their economic and political rise as a community.

b. But a stand against this approach is taken by educated lay people who live in the cities and towns where they have found acceptance in spite of their caste. Caste has not been much of a barrier to them partly because of their education and partly because of the city atmosphere where caste can remain unknown or be kept concealed. They have been happy about not being numbered among scheduled castes deserving of special treatment. Now they feel threatened by the new move to extend special treatment to christians too and by the willingness of village christians to accept such benefits along with inclusion in scheduled caste category. Their plan therefore is to organise themselves into a separate 'catholic

samaj' and sever if need be all connections with the villagers in order to claim and guard a higher social status.

The positive aspect of this move by the educated is that the catholic laity is getting united without missionary aid for the first time. But there are limitations to the unity since the caste hierarchy is basically accepted. And when they speak of catholics, it is the Wankar catholics that is meant. Even among them there is a hierarchy of the Charotars, the Vakals, the Kanams, the Bhals and so on, and no steps have been taken to break down such distinctions of high and low. Besides, these economically better off catholics have given little thought to the plight of the villagers. They make no concerted effort towards the economic uplift of their own in the villages as those do who talk of building up political power and utilizing Government aid projects. They prefer to leave such concerns to the missionary. Nor have all of them accepted the social responsibility of repaying in time the loans they took from church run projects, so that others could profit from the loan schemes. All their preoccupation seems to centre on repressing and forgetting their feeling of social inferiority. But the disease is not healed, the cancer is there deep within, and the group remains highly vulnerable. Should a caste-man someday find out and call them 'Dhed', their world would on a sudden come crashing down.

c. Other efforts made in this direction are even sorrier. On the basis of our caste names, which are the same as those of the Rajputs, some try to pose as Rajput Kshatriyas to show that they do not belong to the despised lot. Others seek a solution to their problem in the etymology of the word 'Dhed', claiming that the word derives from 'Thera', one of the ancient Buddhist Hinayana sects. It is alleged that the Brahmins who joined this sect were derisively called 'Theras'. In time Thera became Dhed! These rationalisations relying on myths and imagined glories of the past do not question the tradition of classifying human beings as high and low by birth; they only seek to claim highcasteness for some, implying lowcasteness for others.

d. Father Heredero's approach at first was purely socio-logical; later it had to be modified into a socio-economic approach. Heredero shows that the present caste system is a result of economic exploitation which then had its inevitable repercussions at the social, religious and personal levels. A religious myth was created to justify the unjust socio-economic structure. A value judgement is passed on whole groups of people who are then considered and treated as dirt and used as cheap, unpaid or bonded labour. The myth is perpetuated in order to exploit the group economically. Systematic brain-washing and continued oppression have succeeded in making the oppressed interiorise these myths and accept their present situation as natural and never think of challenging or changing it. The underdog must be made to respect himself as a child of God. But those who are at the mercy of others, wholly dependent and subservient, cannot easily break their bonds. Unless the underdog has independent means of livelihood self-respect is hard to achieve and emancipation out of the question. Rejection of a system by the downtrodden will lead to rejection of the downtrodden by the dominant groups that control the people's daily bread. No movement can carry on for long on an empty stomach. Heredero would therefore opt for a 'co-operative model'.

The communist model would have us unite all the poor, oppressed groups under one banner for class struggle. But in India, at least in Gujarat, this seems impractical. The sense of caste hierarchy is too strong to let any group collaborate for any meaningful length of time with others whom it considers lower. An example will show this. In the recent anti-reservation stir in Gujarat, the christians of a village were made to sit quiet at first with the assurance that they and their homes would be spared and that only the hindu Wankars would have to suffer. The villagers were thus divided, and then the whole village was burnt down. Were the oppressed Baraiyas and Harijans of Gujarat to unite under the banner of one oppressed class, they would together make 65 per cent of the population and would be a power to reckon with. But taking the Indian reality as it is, which Baraiya

will agree to co-operate with Harijans and be branded as a Harijan himself? He would prefer to be exploited rather than be counted an outcaste.

Some conclusions

All the approaches have their merits and defects. The one of Heredero appeals to me the most, and yet it has major shortcomings. Its leadership is quite a lot dependent on the clergy. Its functioning depends much on financial aid mostly foreign. How long can this go on, and what attitudes is it likely to create? Besides, this approach remains localised while the magnitude of the problem calls for a large scale movement. The question of political power cannot be overlooked. The movement of the lay leaders seems to be in the right direction as far as the political aspect is concerned though it tends to endorse caste hierarchy which is unacceptable from the christian view point. It seeks to build up power on two fronts: political strength through the unity of the entire caste irrespective of religious affiliations, and economic well-being through fight for Government benefit schemes for christian Wankars on the same terms as those offered to hindu Wankars. If this can mobilise the entire Harijan population of Gujarat numbering about two million, a tremendous force for change can be created. The catholic samaj movement has the advantage of being a lay venture and enjoys the support of the intelligentsia. It will have to be taken into confidence and its fears allayed through a fresh look at the larger issues involved.

We are all born in a social group. Jesus himself was born and brought up in a particular social milieu. He accepted his milieu as his own and said, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel' (Mt 15/24). He respected the authority of Jewish leadership as far as it represented God's Word and Will to the people, but when it came to standards and values contrary to true religion he fought for the truth. He emphasised the equality of Samaritans and Jews of Jews and Gentiles, of sinners and scribes of tax-collectors and pious pharisees. He placed people at the centre of religious concern and rejected everything that came in the way of brotherly love.

For him the sabbath was for man, and not the other way round. And the sabbath included all man made reality. Were caste reality a help to people to grow towards their final goal through love and co operation, were it a form of group solidarity and security without being closed in upon itself it might be acceptable. But if it becomes closed, divisive and oppressive, if it prevents people from opening up more and more to the wider human family and to God who is the Father of all if it contradicts the truth of our common humanity, it must be rejected. A hierarchy of human beings founded on value judgement on the basis of birth is an untruth, and that must go. Christian action which only enables some individuals to move up the social ladder is far yet from the task of evangelizing; it is not yet proclaiming the Gospel of the freedom and equality of all the children of God. Christian task is to work for a thorough restructuring of existing patterns of human relationships and shape and demonstrate new patterns in which the Kingdom and Family of God can become manifest on our earth. This is the task of the Harijan christians themselves together with all their Harijan brothers and sisters. Liberation of the people can be achieved only by the people and by no one else. They will extricate themselves from interiorised false value system they will give up hiding behind myths and seeking alibis. they will drop the need to ape the caste man and will wake up to their own worth and to the dignity of being themselves, and take their destiny into their own hands. I belong to this struggle and this march and I am confident we shall overcome someday.

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Caste Dynamics

The ill-treated and exploited Harijans of India number some 80 million. Of these about 2 million live in Gujarat. Like their brothers and sisters elsewhere they are socially, economically and educationally backward; and are often forced to live in very debasing and dehumanising conditions. The State Government has taken certain protective and ameliorative measures on their behalf. The ongoing violent agitation in Gujarat is directly linked to a demand by the upper castes to do away altogether with the special provisions made for the Harijans. The privileged groups are worried about their acquired positions because the Government has drawn up a list of 82 socially backward castes and groups for special consideration with a view to their upliftment through reservation of seats in educational institutions and government jobs. In this context we wish to study certain aspects of the problem which are of special interest from a Christian viewpoint. We shall centre attention on the Wankar caste of Central Gujarat on whom Christian missionary influence has been considerable. We focus on the phenomena of caste mobility, caste dynamics and inequality among the Wankars.

The Wankar caste

The power of the caste system is such that even outcast groups have been influenced by its hierarchical order. The Wankars, though untouchables, rank at the top of the untouchable outcast hierarchy. Below them are other untouchables like Chamars and Bhangis. Caste Hindus, however, pay little heed to such distinctions. They dump all the untouchables together and refer to them by a generic name "Dhed" which is a word of supreme contempt. Every village has a Dhed - vado or Mohollo, that is, a lane along which the huts of the Dheds are situated. Caste Hindus avoid this lane, and avoid all social intercourse and physical contact with Dheds except when they physically abuse Wankar women employed by them in their fields and tobacco processing factories. One

may gather some idea of the attitude of upper castes from sayings like: the left-overs of cattle is more than enough for the Dheds; or like: the Dhed has no religion. This last saying points to the fact that Dheds change their religion easily depending on from where their livelihood comes.

The Wankars are weavers by hereditary occupation. But they are not averse to clearing a buffalo carcass which normally is the caste-specific function of Chamars or Bhangis. The hierarchical order is not too rigid among the untouchables themselves.

Missionary work among the Wankars

In the second half of the 19th century Protestant missionaries found among the Wankars a favorable response to the christian faith. A sizable number became converts. The missionaries consolidated these first gains by providing a measure of economic stability a certain level of education, and a separate social identity. As a result the protestant Wankars became a closed group a self sufficient caste ghetto by themselves. Then came the catholic missionaries who also reaped a rich harvest among the Wankars. The promise of good result led to focussing of early efforts on this caste alone. The early catholic missionaries did not have funds enough to follow the model set by protestants in consolidating the new converts and sealing them off from all contact with the mother caste. And yet facilities like primary schools and boarding houses were made available to all who would take advantage of education. Though conversion meant a rupture from the mother caste, the catholic Wankars did not form a closed group in the social sphere after the model of the protestant converts.

In 1972 the Gujarat Government appointed a commission known as Bakshi Panch to look into the social conditions of the disadvantaged sectors of the population other than the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, and to report on what sections should be considered backward and deserving of special treatment similar to the facilities made available to the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. The report was published in 1976. It in-

cluded converts to Christianity from Scheduled castes, whom it called Gujarati Khristi among those recommended for special concessions.

The report describes the Gujarati Khristi as follows; "The hereditary occupation of this group is that of weavers as this community is mainly constituted out of persons who were originally Harijan weavers. They therefore resemble the class of Harijan weavers in almost all respects of social life. They have continued their marital relations with the members of the Harijan society and the people in villages treat them as they treat Harijans. Even though they have changed their faith, they have almost remained Harijans in other respects.

"The economic conditions have also not improved and their average income does not exceed Rs 150/- per family. Most of the members are also indebted. This community is akin to Harijans (Scheduled castes) and suffer from almost all the disadvantages of the Scheduled castes. The level of literacy in larger towns is high. Secondary education in the larger towns cannot be said to be on the lower level. But the position in the rural area seems to be different where the level of both primary and secondary educations is low. The percentage of higher education in towns as well as in rural areas is very low." (p. 80)

This is too brief a description of the Gujarati Khristi, based on data collected in the early seventies with a view to identify the socially and educationally backward sections of society. Were a complete report with more recent data and careful analysis attempted, the picture might be somewhat different. Yet the Bakshi Panch report, brief as it is, is correct in its observation that the Gujarati Khristi "resemble the class of Harijan weavers in almost all respects of social life" and that "the people in villages treat them as they treat Harijans". In fact caste people call them Wankar Khristi, even Dhed-Khristi, or simply Khristi which has in it the same venom and contempt as the appellation Dhed.

In other words: has not the change of faith been a mere change of label? That is what the Bakshi report seems to imply. Another study of the same region by David Pocock as early as 1969 suggests that Christian Wankars rank slightly higher in the social scale than the Wankar Hindus. While Christians would like to underline this difference, and while there are distinctions to make between urban and rural christians, caste Hindus do not care; to these all christians are contemptible outcast Dheds. Even those christians who have settled in cities and have secured good jobs through higher education are, on occasional visits to their native villages, humiliated by caste Hindus with comments like "sudharelo khristi" or "sudharelo dhed", which means civilized edition of christian or urban dhed. Caste Hindus make it a point to set on catholic priests with appellations like "Dhedno Saheb" or "Dhedno padri". A certain Vinod Kumar Malaviya, a caste Hindu, mentions an experience of his dated as late as 1978. On his way to a village he picked up a caste boy on the pillion of his motorcycle in order to get direction to the residence of the local catholic priest. As soon as the boy learnt of the destination of Vinodkumar he asked him to stop the vehicle, jumped off the seat, and said with utter disgust: 'to the padri's place! ... that's ... the road', and walked off.

A number of christians have taken up the teaching profession. If the caste Hindu students want to harrass the christian teacher they utter the abominable word Dhed behind his back but within his hearing. Caste Hindus resent christians working in village panchayat because such work connote position and prestige. They devise dubious ways of making hell for christian workers who abandon their job, finding the jibes and slicing remarks unbearable.

A student's personal experience: "Till S. S. C. I did not know what being a Wankar christian meant because I lived and studied in completely christian surroundings. It is after S. S. C. when I joined a Hindu college and needed to reveal the name of my village that my caste-hindu classmates hit me with contempt-loaded words." ...Oh the khristi mohollo... Dhedvado...! "I changed my college, this time to a christian

one and was anxious to cover up my real caste identity. I answered questions with "I am a christian but not from Gujarat".

Another student recalls his feelings: "I was attending a Hindu school and was trying to hide my caste-identity, but my classmates found it out. Since I was topping my class and they needed my help I was not insulted. But I was ever on pins and needles, because anyday they might call me Dhed... Some of the caste Hindus are poorer than us and yet they think they are one up because they think we are hereditarily doing low, dirty, unhygienic jobs though in fact we no more do them. To those of us in particular who have nothing to do with that occupation but are as well placed in life as the caste Hindus are, it is deeply painful and hurting to be called Dhed. Maybe they are venting their jealousy and frustration as we have bettered our life. But it hurts." Another student's voice: "The village christian does not mind being called Dhed but we who are educated and live in towns resent being called Dhed. The upper castes know this well. But I think their own sense of superiority is threatened if we come up in life."

Most rural Wankar christians are agricultural laborers or have small marginal plots of land. They are therefore dependent on the upper castes of the locality with extensive landed property. "If we do not submit to their whims and fancies we may not get work the following day. Without patronage we cannot manage. But along with patronage goes a bundle of exploitation too." For instance: "We had a small plot of land. Our caste Hindu neighbour wanted to make a road through it for his truck to pass. Unwillingly, in the name of prudence, we conceded four feet. He took ten feet, and when we complained he abused us in the filthiest language. We have sued him but we know we can't fight it out as the law always favours the rich. In the meantime he keeps showering us with filthy words without any provocation on our part and I feel like shooting the fellow down."

"Three of us christians, college students, went to a village for a camp. We stayed in a caste Hindu family which

treated us well until a few days later they came to know that I was a Gujarati Khristi. Then their behaviour towards me changed completely as if I had committed some grave crime."

A good many Wankar women work in the tobacco processing factories in the rural areas. They are illiterate, ignorant, ill paid and sexually exploited by the caste Hindu owners. They have to submit to indignities if they want to keep their miserable job and earn a pittance. If they resist, then, "Don't come for work tomorrow onwards", or are given additional heavy work and harassed with jibes.

Caste dynamics and caste mobility

The Wankar caste has split up along religious lines into a number of groups: there are Wankar Khojas (muslims), Wankar christians (protestants), Wankar christians (catholics) and of course Wankar hindus who have stuck to the mother caste. While agreeing with Bakshi Panch on the socio-economic and educational backwardness of Wankar christians (catholics), we consider it necessary to introduce a distinction, namely between the urban and the rural groups. Bakshi's observations fit rural catholics better than urban catholics. The dynamics between the two groups should be taken into account in any attempt to understand caste mobility and the value system underlying it.

a. Urban model

Urbanised, well-placed, middle-income-group families number about 200. These are the ones who took advantage of educational facilities provided by missionaries and moved to the cities in search of well-paid jobs. Most have graduated, some have done their post-graduation and have found employment in banks, schools, colleges, firms, technical institutions, mills etc. A good many live in housing colonies with people of all castes but of a similar income group. The caste factor apparently has been played down. These urban catholics have changed or anglicised their names, for instance, from Parmar to Pereira, from Macwana to Macwan or Macsons or Macdonald. They are careful to display their educational qualifications and degrees on the door of their houses. Their

life-style befits their income-bracket, with constant addition of *gadgets* to home furniture. Thus it is possible to say that the urbanised catholic Wankars have broken out of the fetters of untouchability and caste ignominy by getting educated and migrating to towns and taking on jobs in all kinds of occupations and professions.

The Bakshi Panch inclusion of Gujarati Khristi among backward groups has piqued this urbanised section which refuses to consider itself socially, economically and educationally backward. Legally they are not Scheduled caste which they were before, they became christians; actually they are not backward which they were before, they got educated and employed in towns. After this double emancipation they resent being included among the 82 backward communities needing protective amelioration from the Government. For them the issue is not amelioration and aid but prestige. To be labelled backward class would amount to losing the social advantage already secured and to being returned to the original status of Scheduled castes and Harijans. They have therefore been urging that Gujarati christians should refuse the benefits of the Bakshi Panch which can endanger their own acquired status and prestige in society.

Their argument is that the missionaries should concentrate rural christians and strive to uplift them socially and make them respectable. They have openly shown their resentment against missionaries for opening their doors and resources to non-christians of the region. Social respectability is the ruling value at the moment, and the model for acquiring it is the one these urban catholics have set: get educated, go to the cities find good employment, and live in housing colonies or middle class flats. This is the only way of emancipation they see for Gujarati christians. In this model the missionary plays a vital role by giving an impetus through the resources he possesses, material as well as non-material.

Of late this urbanised section has formed what is known as "Gujarati Khristi samaj bandharan", Gujarati Christian Society Constitution. Its meetings drew representatives and participants mostly from urban, educated, fairly well-placed

people and a sprinkling of rural people. In the meeting were represented the three hierarchically graded Wankar subgroups named Charotaris, Chasis and Bhals. The urbanised catholics come mostly from the Charotari subgroup which looks down on the other two with whom they do not intermarry and have no social exchange. The Charotaris dominated the meeting and advised the Bhals and Chasis: "*You must do something to uplift your people.*"

If their urban model of emancipation is not accepted the Gujarati Khristi samaj bandharan prefers to split from the rural catholics and from a socially viable group by themselves, and try to acquire the same respectability as the Goan or Mangalorean catholics in the region have. The veiled threat of forming a separate social entity has already been served to the rural catholics who have been also doing a bit of thinking and organising of their own.

b. Rural model

The rural Wankar christians cannot be differentiated from the Wankar Hindus socially, economically or educationally. An yet it must be said that they are not to be completely identified with Hindu Wankars either. They are similar in many respects but are not the same. A lot more social awareness and awakening has been creeping in among the rural catholics. They are forging alternative models of emancipation from caste ignominy and socio-economic backwardness.

In "secular" India when a scheduled caste member joins a religion other than Hindu or Sikh, he is no more considered to be backward and therefore not entitled to the protective and ameliorative measures of the Government. But in case he reverts to his old faith he automatically becomes eligible! In this State-controlled incentive for a particular religion the christian stands to lose. Losing backward-class-ship was considered heroic by old missionaries for the cause of the faith. But today this idea has changed. Some missionaries are positively encouraging catholics to take advantage of the commission benefits; and backward-class-ship is delinked from the cause of the faith.

In addition to this a rural catholic layman actively involved in State politics is spearheading the campaign to make people accept the Backward caste amenities given by the Government. Change of religion need not imply change of caste. Though religiously Wankars are Bhojas, Protestants, Catholics and Hindus, they all stand on the same social platform and within the same caste. As a politician he points out that it is necessary to stand together on the basis of caste, low as it is, in order to acquire bargaining power in the political arena. Divided into religious splinter groups they would have no bargaining power as they are numerically weak; the other caste groups and parties are intent on playing one religious group against another in order to dominate them the easier.

He is urging rural catholics to accept the fact that they are Wankars and to be proud that they are such - a message which reminds one of the "Black is beautiful" movement. The rural leadership also feels that not many can be emancipated on the model set by the urban catholics. Only very few would rise in rank and status, while grass-root level conscientisation of the rural catholics and offering them another model would lead to far greater success. The rural leadership has pointed out the deficiency of the urban bloc. While the urban bloc has emancipated itself it does nothing in its turn for their rural brethren except ask the missionaries to do something. Where is the genuine christian concern? They accuse the urban bloc of implicitly advising missionaries to go abroad and beg for rural catholics. But why should missionaries do so when the government is ready to take some steps in the direction of betterment? Is this not more respectable than begging abroad? There is, besides, considerable political advantage in all the Wankars standing together irrespective of religious affiliations.

The leaders of the rural group have started a publication, "Nav Vidhan", Re-orientation or A New Perspective. This has become an effective tool of conscientisation among the rural people. It has been reporting a number of grievances against petty crimes and injustices committed by caste people against the Wankars. Teams have been sent to study the situation and in some cases effective steps have been taken to

remedy the evil. For instance, in a village called Chikodhra a caste hindu set up a cow-shed in the Khristi-mohollo with the result that the lane was filled with cattle filth and became breeding ground for mosquitoes and the area was hardly habitable. Besides, the man's trucks and tractors pass daily through the lane making it hazardous for children to play outside. No amount of polite complaints helped. Response to complaints was invariably foul language, abuses and threats. An appeal was made to Nav Vidhan a team, was sent to the village; a meeting was called and the persons concerned responded favorably.

Some sociological observations

Though caste is determined by birth, caste mobility is not an uncommon phenomenon. "Sanskritization" was one of the ways in which upward mobility in the caste hierarchy used to be secured. Today probably that is not the high road of social climb. The lower castes have other means of upgrading their status in the class hierarchy if not in the caste hierarchy. The new path leads through education, urbanisation, white collar jobs and regular income. Surely today the status-group concept based not only on wealth or income but also on approved behaviour patterns, has opened up avenues for social mobility. Caste is gradually being relegated to the background as status-groups are gaining in strength.

The urbanised Gujarati catholics who have acquired wealth and income and copied the behaviour patterns of higher income groups have got out of the clutches of caste ignominy. But their poor brethren in the rural areas are constantly reminding them of their roots. Hence the concern of the urban group to dissociate themselves from the others and form a separate status-group. The missionaries have definitely played a role in bringing about upward mobility of the urban group. Catholic Wankars are more open to the possibilities of upward mobility than non catholic Wankars.

The rural leaders seek upliftment of rural Wankars as a group. Their political sense tells them that no forward step is possible unless the divided groups, splintered along religious

lines, come together and stand on a common Wankar caste platform. While fighting politically on the common caste platform the leadership is aware of the need of purifying caste customs, traditions and superstitions. It is trying to make use of an existing caste network minus its evils for social and political gains.

Theological observations

Caste has become a divisive and oppressive reality; it fragments society isolates group from group, and places one on top of the other. The fences of caste keep each group closed up within itself and barred from reaching out to others. One could ask if the influence of the Christian faith has been working in the direction of openness across caste barriers or of forming new closed units isolated and exclusive. Have we been overcoming the evil of caste or creating christian or catholic castes? Reaching out is a Gospel value, openness is a Gospel value. To what extent has christian presence contributed to discovering and promoting these values in the Gujarati community? Have conversions resulted in purely positional change without structural change? That is to say, have those who became christians found an opportunity to climb higher on the caste or class ladder without at the same time realizing conversion from caste values to the values of the Gospel? If the structure of society has been inegalitarian, to what extent has the christian group confronted inequality and injustice in the wider society? Or has the upward movement of some left the existing structures intact? In that case one must say that positionally some have climbed higher but structurally society has remained the same.

While there is keen desire for upliftment among the rural group, the urbanised sector has demonstrated a radical craving for status prestige and social esteem, have acquired these in some measure and begun to look down on the rural group. It wants the missionaries to do something for the rural folk with whom it would feel ashamed to identify and for whom it is willing to do little. Here one comes across the force of prestige and status waxing strong against ideals of

equality brotherhood and common endeavour. The tendencies recorded in this christian group make us reflect on the direction along which the strains and stresses in living the Gospel lie. They also question our role as missionaries: to what extent are we agents of upward social mobility and to what extent are we agents of Gospel values and of a new humanity? To what extent do we enable christians to a new understanding of society and to action for structural change in the existing one?

Have the urbanised catholics really emancipated themselves? Maybe, economically, educationally, occupationally, and socially they have; but perhaps psychological and spiritual liberation is yet to come. The moment they are called "Dhed" they can be in the dumps, deeply hurt, feeling all the other aspects of emancipation insipid and flat. They have been trying quite a few approaches to hide their original caste identity as untouchables. They do not yet have the bold freedom of declaring themselves Dheds and affirming the values of being Dheds. The identity they seek to hide keeps nagging them constantly. In contrast to this, the rural group is more realistic. They are not too much upset by the group name Dhed. And now there is a positive move to accept and be proud of the fact that they are Wankars. "Black is beautiful." To be a Dhed is beginning to be a great thing.

The attempt of the rural group to seek political alignments and alliance with all Wankars on the basis of the mother-caste irrespective of religious affiliations also poses problems to the missionary. Will such link-up undo what missionaries have been trying to build? Will it prove a threat to the faith of the people? Can they be christian by faith and remain Wankar by caste, maintaining their own culture and customs provided these do not contradict the Gospel faith? When will faith critique caste itself when caste solidarity is accepted as the basis of social and political action?

Many a missionary has reasons to feel threatened with this move. Because, his model for emancipation has been the urban one. He has been accustomed to measuring the success of his work by the number of people who have become edu-

cated, have come up in life established themselves in secular society and been 'civilised'. Correspondingly, the urban group has been fast taking to western habits in life-style, and setting store by pious practices and ritual observances rather than by concern for brotherhood, equality, openness and justice for all. We need to ask if our efforts at christianising have tended to consolidate caste and class values rather than transform the heart and social relationships through an experience of the Kingdom.

All humanity is graced in Christ. There can be no high or low. All have been given the capacity to become children of God. We may need associations and groupings, but there is need of constant watchfulness lest they become closed, divisive and oppressive. If we believe in Christ we have to co-operate with him in building a world of equality and freedom. Have not caste and class been obstacles to this goal? Let us remember that the baptism we receive and share with the people is not the baptism of John but of Jesus. John baptized with water; Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Delhi

Lancy Lobo

Caste Discrimination

An incident came to my mind as I began to write this article. It occurred in the year 1969 at a diocesan seminar on the Church in India. Many lay speakers were begging to be admitted to the decision making bodies in the Church and were rebuffed. Then, there was Holy Mass and the collection plate was passed round. A priest who had been observing the proceedings of the day remarked: 'Had the lay people withheld the offerings the clergy would have been begging to be admitted to the decision making bodies in the Church.' Similar is the case of caste discrimination. Many people complain of the caste discrimination they suffer. But all the while they hold the key to the problem in their own hands. In this paper, I discuss some specific caste discrimination and some possible solutions.

Sukhlal is a young man in one of the small towns of Gujarat. He belongs to the Bhangi community the lowest in the caste hierarchy in India. His parents who carry night soil on their heads had him educated up to B. A. Wishing to become a teacher Sukhlal then took the B. Ed. degree. In his training period he used to think: 'My father and mother are in perpetual want. We go from house to house begging for the food left over in the homes of our patrons. When I become a teacher I will be the happiest man on earth. I will have enough money to build a good house, and to buy new clothes in place of the second-hand clothes I am given by the patrons of my parents. I will be able to enjoy food to my heart's content. I will be a leader in my community. Children will respect me in the class room even though in private they might refer to me as Bhangi. That will not bother me. I am used to it. Whenever people of other communities want votes or some political assistance I will be the one to be sent for and consulted. Trained teachers are in short supply in this region. I am sure to get a post as a teacher immediately after my training. Besides with the reservation of jobs there can be no hurdles on my way.'

However Sukhlal had underestimated caste sentiments. After his training he applied for a teaching post. There was no Bhangi on the selection board. The members of the board reasoned differently: 'Why should a Bhangi teach Brahmin, Rajput and Vania children? By no means. Oh, there is the nuisance of reservations. If the Bhangi insists on getting the job, we will see that a Harijan not belonging to the Bhangi community is selected. It is a lesser evil to select a Chamar than a Bhangi as teacher.' Sukhlal's ambition to become a teacher remained a castle in the air. The selection board made the decisions. The members of the board had their way without Sukhlal suspecting a thing. Ten times he applied for a teacher's job in response to advertisements. Ten times he had borrowed money from friends to go to the places where interviews were held. In the end, he became wiser and more realistic. He realised that it is too much for a Bhangi to aspire to become a teacher. He stopped the futile exercises of applying for teaching posts and appearing for interviews. He sought political patronage and found that the politicians of the area had no objection to his representing the Bhangi ward in the municipal council. He found positive encouragement along that line. The caste people preferred to have an educated and cleanly dressed Bhangi as a member of the municipal council rather than an illiterate one in dirty clothes. The caste people were even ready to help him further. The municipal authorities gave him a supervisory job in the department of disposing night soil. Sukhlal is currently a kind of boss over 50 or more scavengers employed by the municipality.

At times, Sukhlal complains about the discrimination he has suffered. But he blames the Chamars for the wrongs: "The reserved quota of jobs for scheduled castes is there but the Chamars corner most of the benefits from reservation. They have become influential and they place their educated youths in lucrative posts. Several Bhangi including me have become graduates with B. Ed. But we fail to get selected as our community is the lowest. Others snatch away all the benefits. Graduates of our community are compelled to continue working as scavengers in the absence of other suitable openings."

Sukhlal had underestimated not only caste sentiments but also the strength of his own community. The municipality in which he works has a population of nearly half a lakh. It is greatly dependent on the Bhangis for the disposal of night soil and other dirt and waste. If the Bhangis absent themselves from work on two consecutive days, there will be a first rate health hazard on hand. Caste restrictions prevent members of other castes from carrying away night soil. If the Bhangis would stand united and refuse to clean the night soil the municipality would have to come to terms with the Bhangis on strike or hire Bhangis from outside to come and do the work. The latter option is rather complicated. The municipality would be likely to try to bargain with the Bhangis in the first place and make some substantial concessions if necessary. Giving suitable jobs to educated Bhangis would be a concession which the municipality might make under pressure of the strike. If negotiations would not bear the desired fruits, the municipality might impose some sanctions like not giving left over food and second-hand linen to the Bhangis. The authorities might also conspire with the police and implicate a number of Bhangis in criminal cases and have them arrested. One handy way of doing this would be supplying alcohol to the Bhangis through some agents and getting the leaders drunk and having them jailed for the offence of breaking the prohibition laws. In fact the municipality is aware of its total dependence on the Bhangis and appears to be happy that many of the scavengers are addicted to alcohol and gambling both of which are banned by law. The Bhangis are already hooked and may be easily jailed, should they begin to act funny and smart. The municipality could easily persuade the police to give the 'third degree treatment' to the Bhangis once they are behind bars. Another course of action that the municipality might take is to incite some miscreants to burn down the homes of the Bhangis and beat up all and sundry in the Bhangis' homes. This possibility is not so remote as some people may imagine. Very few persons have been brought to book in India for the offence of murdering Bhangis or other Harijans or tribals.

I was once horrified to hear a protestant missionary tell how in the tribal area where he is working a human life is worth only two hundred rupees. Poor tribals may be murdered for two hundred rupees by assassins who are plentiful in his area. If the Bhangis are burned alive some newspapers may publish the events for a couple of days to provide some variety to their readers and forget all about the happenings thereafter. In the face of violence the Bhangis stand no chance of getting any redress. The municipal magnates believe in Ahimsa (non violence) when it is a question of cows and goats but not when Bhangis are concerned. A very revered contemporary Indian saint of our times acquired much fame in India by going on a fast unto death to compel the government to enact legislation to ban cow slaughter. He did not think it worthwhile to do the same to compel the government to enforce the laws banning the slaughter of Harijans and tribals. The Bhangis are bound to take into consideration the morally putrid condition of the sanskritic society in which they live.

The Bhangis may adopt another course of action which avoids head-on confrontation between caste Hindus and themselves. They may leave their residences and scavenging occupation and live temporarily as casual labourers in agriculture or industry. With great hardships and discipline they may try to set up a small factory in course of time if they are able to awaken the collective consciousness of the members of their community. A great deal of education of the average members of the community will be necessary to awaken the consciousness of the community. It is not literacy or the current type of formal education that the Bhangis will require, but an education which will make them fearless, self-reliant and creative. They will have to equip themselves for new occupations which will give them a decent means of livelihood. They will need to unlearn a whole philosophy of total dependence on others and of resignation to crude forms of exploitation and loss of self-respect. In my opinion, the Bhangis can command the respect of other communities if they can gain self-respect. If they do that movements will

surely follow which in course of time and through much struggle, are sure to transform their social conditions.

An interesting fact is that the Christian Churches too, have been discriminating against the Bhangis. One can understand why the Antyodaya Programme of the Madhya Pradesh Government in 1977 did not aim at the emancipation of Bhangis. But it is difficult to explain the lack of care and concern of the Churches for the scavengers. The Bhangis undoubtedly are "the least of Christ's brethren" in India. But this fact has not moved the Christian Churches to serve them. The Churches took a special interest in organising special missions to the Brahmins and in some cases came down to evangelising the Chamars. But they left the Bhangis out of any move for liberation in Christ.

The Bhangis are the worst discriminated against and as such they have their peculiar problems. Some other communities are above the Bhangis but still come under the category of out-castes or Harijans. The members of these castes are also discriminated against, but they in their turn discriminate against those below them.

"Chana, do you eat food cooked by a member of the leather working community? You should have better sense than that. Don't you know that food cooked by Chamars is polluting? It is better to starve than eat from the hands of members of a lower caste. You have to be careful about who cooks your food." Chana was a tribal boy hardly 14 years old. He was being indoctrinated by Chandu a senior boy who had attended college for a year. Chandu was himself a Harijan belonging to the Vankar caste. In the past the members of his community were considered untouchables by caste Hindus. Even tribals in villages do not eat food or drink water from Vankars. When the conversation between Chandu and Chana became known, the former who was taking training to become a bare foot lawyer was dismissed from the training course. Chandu denied the allegation against him, and was reinstated by the authorities even though his guilt was clear beyond reasonable doubt. Two reasons weighed with the authorities for reinstating him. (1) Practically the whole society is tainted

by discriminatory caste sentiments. Chandu is only a sample member of a guilty society. It would not be fair to single him out when nearly all are guilty. 2) Chandu could be warned not to repeat the offence. This would give him a chance to correct himself. After he was reinstated, Chandu reflected over the incident and confessed on his own initiative that he had been guilty and assured the authorities that he would not commit the mistake again. It may be noted that Chana was eating the food cooked for a clergy man who was fastidious about cleanliness. But cleanliness was not the point of the complaint but the caste of the cook.

Chandu's outlook on life and perhaps his self-image are hierarchically coloured and socially instilled. His being a child of God among children of God is not of much affective significance to him. He finds his worth in his social superiority over leather workers. Presumably he feels humiliated too by his social inferiority to so many others. He might have been trying to compensate himself for the humiliation he feels in being inferior to members of caste Hindus and tribals. The secular education or perhaps the bare foot lawyers' training course might have introduced another compartment of consciousness conflicting with his hierarchical and traditional outlook on society. His confession of guilt and his resolve to transcend his past may indicate that at the time of denial of guilt social pressures were more powerful than moral considerations and that there is still a spark of humanity and nobility in him which may blossom under favourable circumstances with some effort on his part.

Chandu and the sick society in which he lives require curative treatment. Nothing is achieved by penalising individuals like Chandu. They are only symptoms of an ailing collectivity. It may not be possible to cure the collectivity by taking care of the individuals in it for the reason that society is not just a sum total of all its members. A collective remedy has to be sought touching the very self-image and outlook of society regarding the identity of its members. It is only if society accepts the concept of equality of all men that caste discrimination will cease altogether. The concept is already partially accepted in India. It is only a question of full acceptance.

The supports of the concept of equality need be strengthened and those of the concept of inequality need be undermined. The means could, I believe, include adopting some creative occupations for all to make a living. Productive work is normally the means of self-expression for human beings and it helps them to keep sane. When many persons disengage themselves from productive work and live as parasites they invariably channel their energies along pathological lines and invent things like caste superiority and inferiority. If bread is denied to these idlers in society, their return to sanity can not be far.

In Kheda district of Gujarat, there is a category of Christians who were Vankars in the past. The community is over fifty years old. The members of the community hate to be known as Vankar Christians or even to be reminded of their past. They have been trying to improve their social position and were partly successful with their improved standard of education and the avenues of new occupations which education opened up for them. The Kheda missionaries report that caste has become a preoccupation with the community and that no effort is spared to move up in the hierarchy. It would seem that the concept of child of God among children of God is yet to be fully appreciated by them. Travelling in India I came across a Bishop and a Jesuit Provincial who went about claiming credit for their Brahmin ancestry. For them, their descent from supposed Brahmin parents was more a matter of pride than the fact of their being children of the great God. Yes, caste can be very powerful and can prevent the concept of child of God among children of God from penetrating its armour.

If the Church in India desires to expedite the total liberation of man the bishops, priests and sisters must at least symbolically take up the scavengers' broom and experience the oppression of caste. But this sort of identification with the least of Christ's brethren can come only if we are mindful of them and deeply concerned about the implications of the Gospel.

Outside the Gate, Sharing the Insult

This meditation is an attempt to see caste and untouchability from the point of view of Jesus as far as this is possible to a disciple who follows him "at a distance" and wishes to follow him closer. It proceeds in two steps. First, it takes a quick look at the reality of caste as it operates in our country today. Then, it seeks to sense the mind of Jesus and in the end some tasks are indicated.

1. The reality of caste

Crime, infection, obscenity

If Jesus were to come to birth in India, would he be caste or outcaste? high or low? what would be his choice?

Gandhiji said:

"I was in Nellore on the 6th of April. I met 'untouchables' there and I prayed that day, as I have done today, that if I have to be reborn, I should be born an untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings, and the affronts levelled at them, in order that I may endeavour to free myself and them from that *miserable* condition. I prayed that if I should die with any of my desires unfulfilled, with my service of the 'untouchables' unfinished, with my Hinduism unfulfilled, I may be born again amongst the 'untouchables' to bring my Hinduism to its fulfilment.. I regard untouchability as the greatest *blot* on Hinduism."¹

Gandhiji hated untouchability. He worked for its abolition, and already in this birth he sought to identify himself with the outcastes. He allowed himself only the minimum of clothing they were allowed. He swept and scavenged with

1. Gandhi, M. K.: in *Young India*, 4 May 1921; from a speech made at the Suppressed Class Conference in Ahmedbad.
* Most emphases here and throughout the article have been added by the author.

them. He was convinced that "it is a *sin* to regard anyone born in Hinduism as polluted or untouchable". To do so is *satanic*, he said. To him untouchability was a *crime* of which the nemesis had overtaken us in the treatment we met with at the hands of the English. "We have segregated the 'pariah' (paraya) and we are in turn segregated in the British colonies. We deny him the use of public wells; we throw the leavings of our plate at him. His very shadow pollutes us. Indeed there is no charge that the pariah cannot fling in our faces and which we do not fling in the face of the Englishman."²

Bharatan Kumarappa points out that Gandhi who taught and practised non-violence, "could not remain blind to the *inhuman violence* perpetrated on a section of our population, who were condemned to live *outside* the pale of civilization, without social amenities, made to do the dirtiest work, humiliated to the dust and treated with contempt...No religion worth the name, Gandhi was convinced, could be guilty of such *atrocities*...So it must be cut out root and branch, or Hinduism would perish".³

Gandhi not only denounced untouchability but rejected the caste system itself. He wrote: "I abhor with my whole soul the system which has reduced a large number of Hindus to a level less than that of *beasts*."⁴ The system was, to Gandhiji, "as *devilish* as...the English system of government in India".⁵ Caste, he maintained, had nothing to do with religion. In fact caste was *harmful* both to spiritual and national growth.⁶ But then Gandhi proceeded to distinguish caste from *Varna* and *Āśrama*. These he defended. "The law of *Varna* teaches us that we have to earn our bread by following the ancestral calling...There is no calling too low and none too high...Arrogation of a superior status by and of one *Varna* over another is a denial of the law."⁷ It was immediately pointed out to Gandhi by reformers like Sant Ramji of Lahore that his distinction between caste and *Varna* was too philosophical and too subtle to be grasped by the people. "For all practical purposes in the Hindu society caste and *Varna* are

2. Gandhi, M. K.: *The Removal of Untouchability*, Ahmedabad, 1954, pp. 4-5.

3. Kumarappa, B: Editor's note to Gandhi's *The Removal of Untouchability*, Ahmedbad, 1954, pp. iii, iv.

4. Gandhi: *The Removal of untouchability*, p. 6.

5. see *Young India*, 19 January 1921.

6. In *Harijan*, 18 July 1936.

7. *ibid.*

one and the same thing, for the function of both is the same, i.e. to restrict intercaste marriages and inter-dining...Hindus are slaves of caste...To try to remove untouchability without striking at the root of *Varnavyavastha* (the varna system) is... to draw a line on the surface of water... To seek the help of the Shastras for the removal of untouchability and caste is simply to wash mud with mud."⁸ To this and similar criticism Gandhi made never an adequate answer. To the demonstration of ample scriptural basis for caste and untouchability, his reply was to deny the authority of such scriptural passages. In his autobiography Gandhi wrote:

"To remove untouchability is a penance that caste Hindus owe to Hinduism... The purification required is not of untouchables but of the so-called superior castes...I would be content to be torn to pieces rather than disown the suppressed classes... Hindus will certainly never deserve freedom... if they allow their noble religion to be *disfigured* by the retention of the *taint* of untouchability. As I love Hinduism dearer than life itself, the taint has become for me an intolerable burden. Let us not *deny God* by denying to a fifth of our race the right of association on an equal footing."⁹

B. T. Ranadive's comment on this, (and on similar passages):

"This passionate protest leaves nothing unsaid. But the equally passionate desire to keep the landlords and Hindu religion intact (=untouched and untouchable) reduces the protest to a formal declaration only."¹⁰

If Jesus were an Indian citizen denouncing untouchability and caste as vigorously as did Gandhi and working with Gandhi for their abolition, would he also want to keep the landlords and the religions intact? Or would he insist that the landless fifth of the nation should lay claim to a fifth of the land and wealth of the nation? Would he liberate them from the religions and gods of the landlords so that they could be free for a God who upholds the rights and the dignity of the oppressed and the outcaste? Kumarappa says that Gandhi in-

8. *Harijan* 15 August 1936.

9. Gandhi, M. K.: *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*.

10. Ranadive, B. T.: "Caste, Class and Property Relations" in *Economic and Political Weekly*, (EPW) XIV, February 1979, p. 341.

dicted untouchability in flaming words, describing it as “*gross injustice*” and a “*device of satan*”.¹¹ Would Jesus too stop short of flaming words, or would he press for and forward to flaming deeds to deal with the economic basis and ideological legitimization of caste?

According to Jawaharlal Nehru, “the (caste) system brings *degradation* in its train, and is a *burden* and a *curse*. For all its virtue and the stability it had given to Indian society, it carried with it the *seeds of destruction*”¹². Bhagwan Das calls caste an *infection* which “has done *enormous harm* to the country” and especially to the backward sections of society, disunited India, divided Hindus into thousands of little communities. It is opposed to the spirit of democracy and the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. “*Illogical and irrational* as it is, it makes a man coward and self-centred. It *degrades* and *corrupts* society.” Das adverts to the tragic fact that since the advent of freedom in 1947, “this *hybrid monster* has been spreading its tentacles all around and taking everything in its *lethal grip*”.¹³ One tragic aspect of the lethal grip is stressed by Ranadive: “The *poison* of caste divisions has deeply infected its victims — the masses and the lower orders who further are divided into several castes and sub-castes. Each recognizes the injustice done to it but is not ready to remedy the *injustice* done to others by its own superior status”.¹⁴

Within our liberation movement were people who held that “India was unfit for freedom until the people first overcame the inequalities of the caste system. This current was represented by certain social reformers coming from upper castes whose bourgeois democratic consciousness was appalled by the *monstrous iniquities* of the caste system and other *obscenities* of Hinduism”.¹⁵ Tagore lamented India’s *insult* to itself and to God, exercised in its insult to some, many, of its citizens. The strength of a chain is in its weakest link. The

11. Kumarappa, B. : editor’s note to *The Removal of Untouchability*, p. iv.

12. Quoted by Bhagwan Das in his Introduction to Ambedkar’s *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), Bheem Patrika Publications, Jullunder, 1971 (3rd ed.), p. 5.

13. *ibid.* p. 4-7.

14. Ranadive : art. cit., p. 343.

15. cf EPW, XIV, February 1979, p. 337

honour of India is measured by the dishonour of its outcastes. In the treatment meted out to the untouchables and in the stagnant mire of caste India meets death. Tagore sang:

“Oh my unfortunate motherland !
those whom you have insulted
would drag you down to their same level...

By avoiding the touch of man everyday
you have insulted the divinity in man.

So the curse of heaven befalls you,
and you perforce have to share your meal
with all and sundry at the door of famine...

If you avoid to embrace all
and shut yourself up within
the thick walls of pride
you will be simply courting Death...”¹⁶

As long as one man is in chains, mankind is not free, said Karl Marx. As long as a single Indian is outcaste and untouchable, India sits in disgrace, untouchable and outcaste. When Jesus who takes away the sin of the world comes to take away the dishonour of our country, to who will he go first, to the high caste or the outcaste? Where may we look for him, where find him if perchance we would join him?

A pressing concern

The problem of caste and untouchability is no private problem of any one community or religion. It is not even a domestic problem of the Indian nation. It is a human problem like racism, apartheid, war or the mechanisms of underdeveloping and exploiting peoples and lands: it affects world history and touches the dignity of every man and woman. Ranadive is right in insisting that “the question of eliminating the caste system can no longer be presented as a question of Hindu social reform and in isolation from the main struggle of our times - the struggle for agrarian revolution, the struggle for ending the domination of monopolies and imperialist exploitation, the struggle for a state of People’s Democracy leading to Socialism”.¹⁷ It is a question of the essence and authenticity of Democracy in India, a question of honouring our Constitution which is vowed to the removal of untouchability, discrimination and injustice. But it involves more than the honour of the nation.

16. quoted by S. Ghose in *Socialism, Democracy and Nationalism in India*, Bombay, 1973, p. 270.

17. Ranadive: art. cit. p. 347-

It is a question of human rights and civilisation as against barbarism, a matter of humanity, elementary justice and horse-sense. To the christian it is also a fundamental spiritual problem touching the very basis of his faith in God who is the Creator and Father of all men and women, and his faith in Christ the brother and saviour of everyone beginning with the lowest and the least. In our days the problem has become acute and urgent, and is claiming the nation's and the world's attention at all levels, socio-cultural, political and economic. The mounting tensions, contradictions and conflicts are making it clearer each day that our traditional institutions are inadequate to cope with the emerging situation which cannot be met without a thoroughgoing cultural revolution.

Non-names

In our society, constructed like a pyramid on the basis of a hierarchy of castes and classes, the lowest groups bear the burden of the entire edifice. A remarkable fact about the culture of such a society is that it has developed for the most part negative terms to refer to the lowest groups. This is perhaps natural for it is the dominant groups that control culture and shape language which often is a reflex of domination and dependence. It is natural because the dominant groups make themselves the point of reference and set themselves up as standard groups make themselves the point of reference and set themselves up as standard humanity. To these upper sectors of society the outcastes are nameless, they have no self and no identity of their own. They do not count, except, of course, when there is work to be done to produce wealth, to create leisure and the conditions for the development of culture, and to keep society healthy and going. They are *avarṇas*, colourless and non-descript; or *pancamas*, those left over as it were after the four castes have been counted; or *antyajas*, last-born, as if they were an accident, an unwelcome appendix, an unwanted tail. Then they were called the *untouchables*, the upper castes missing the irony of the name since it could work both ways; the superior castes now were not completely touchable either. The 1901 census classified Hindus into seven categories of which the last two were "*the unclean castes*" and "*the unclean feeders*", those from whose hands caste people would not accept water. In the Census Report of 1921 the downtrodden sectors of the population were called "*Depressed Castes*". The name was objected to and provoked a great deal of criticism; it probably exposed some unpalatable truth. Hence in 1931 it was substituted with the appellation "*Exterior Castes*". Note how the negative

connotation persists: non people are given non-names; language and culture reflect social realities. Exterior castes were those who could not be served by a brahmin, nor by barbers, tailors etc. who served caste Hindus; who polluted caste Hindus by contact or proximity; who were debarred from use of public conveniences such as roads, ferries, wells, schools as well as from use of Hindu temples; whose birth carried social disabilities even if they had higher education, high salary jobs or considerable wealth ¹⁸.

No wonder these oppressed masses interiorised this sort of negative valuation of them in which they lived and breathed for centuries. They lost their self as a result, and forgot their name, acquiesced in the system, learned to be thankful for sheer survival, and came to see themselves and speak of themselves as nothing. In 1935 a list of disprivileged castes and tribes was prepared by the Government and attached to Orders-in-Council issued under the Government of India Act of that year. To this order was attached a Schedule divided into nine parts corresponding to nine provinces. This was, according to Ambedkar, "a very terrifying list"; it included 429 communities, some 60 million Indians, deemed to be untouchables, "whose touch causes pollution to the Hindus".¹⁹ Thus since 1936 the term *Scheduled Castes* took the place of Exterior castes; it then got incorporated into the 1950 Constitution of India. Today the Scheduled caste people number over a 100 million who, along with some 40 million Tribals, constitute the most deprived, exploited and harassed people though they are a fifth of India's population and the backbone of the country's agriculture.

So far, then, others have been giving names to the oppressed. Others have been defining their identity for them and informing them of who they are. The information was that they were untouchables, negatives, non persons, nothings. But now these nobodies are beginning to name themselves, to show a new self awareness, to find their own identity and to claim their due place in society. They are beginning to call everybody's attention to their existence and to the vibrancy, promise and threat of that existence. They repudiate appellations imposed on them. They refuse to be Harijans, that is, the people

18. Vidyarthi, L. P. and Mishra, N.: *Harijan Today* Sociological, Economic, Political, Religious and Cultural Analysis, New Delhi, 1977, pp. 2-3, 211-212.

19. Ambedkar, B. R. *The Untouchables*.

of the god of the upper castes and oppressors. They deny upper caste gods. They call themselves *Dalits*; the oppressed. That is what they are. That is their truth and it marks a new accent in the history of their struggle. Thereby they are holding up for all to see a terrible truth Indian society has always sought to keep in the dark, shrouded in much pious and metaphysical verbiage—the truth about the large-scale slavery, violence, exploitation, apartheid and cruelty on which its proud culture rests. Some of the Dalits call themselves *Adi* (=original) Hindu, *Adi Dravida*, or *Adi Andhra* and proceed to organise *Adi Dharma* movements as was done in the Punjab already in 1926.

Oppression

The oppressed are all those forced into poverty, and are deprived of most of human life: those found below poverty line, estimated in 1978 at 306 million, which is some 48 per cent of India's population; and an additional 222 million or 35 per cent of the population who are at the poverty line or just above it. All of them are under-nourished, ill clad, poorly sheltered, deeply exploited, despised and practically outlawed. The Dalits belong to this sea of the wretched, only they have to bear the extra burden and pain of social ignominy attached to their birth and consequently inescapable, irremediable. Birth fixes them as objects of free abuse in every sense of the word, and disallows all social mobility. They may improve themselves interiorly by working in total submission and silence for the upper castes. L. C. Jain points out in a recent article that 70 per cent of India's poverty population and two thirds of its unemployed are found in seven major States of the Union (UP, MP, AP, TN, WB, BI, and MR); and these States precisely have 72 per cent of India's Dalits. The description of poverty in these States, and in India in general, is therefore a description of the condition of Dalits.²²

The Dalits have little access to education. Even bare literacy is low among them. They are *assetless*, being mostly *landless* agricultural laborers or small artisans. "Deprived of education and assets they are neither able to make good nor opt out of the occupational slots in which they are born." They stand no chance in the battle for livelihood; *the contest is unequal*. The rate of *unemployment* goes up to 29 percent in

22. Jain, L. C. : "Emancipation of Scheduled Castes and Tribes : Some Suggestions", in EPW XVI, February 28, 1981 p. 325

rural areas, and *underemployment* is widespread since there is work only for limited periods of the year. The poorer the household, the higher the unemployment rate. *Wages* are arbitrary and pitifully low and fixed by tradition irrespective of rise in price of essential commodities or enormous profits for the employers. All this drives the Dalits into *indebtedness* which in the decade 1965-75 increased from 59 per cent to 65.4 per cent. 1961-71 period showed a twofold increase in the outstanding debt of rural households. The rate of *interest* they are made to pay is incredibly high and range from 25 per cent to 50 per cent. The result of such deepening indebtedness is *bondage* to which even death brings no end. Endless generations can become bonded labor for a few rupees borrowed by a distant long-dead ancestor. "In the absence of assets *the body of the borrower* is mortgaged", says Jain. Agricultural laborers become enslaved, artisans become totally dependent on traders who lend at high interest, sell raw materials at high price and buy products at low price. "The cumulative effect of all these - lack of education, of assets, employment opportunities and of institutional credit services on fair terms - is *destitution*."²³ The now abandoned sixth plan admitted that "three decades of development seem to have bypassed" the Scheduled castes and tribes.

Greater still are the ordeals in store for those who may survive the rigours of poverty and inequality. Untouchability persists-its condemnation by thousands like Gandhi and its abolition by the Constitution notwithstanding. For its economic base is carefully preserved and protected. Scheduled castes continue to be denied access to drinking water wells, eating places, particular village roads, certain modes of transport and even non-traditional institutions such as *bāl*wādīs, youth clubs, *mahilā* mandals and co-operatives. They must do forced labor for endless hours and lay claims to no rights, not even minimum wages. They must surrender their wives and daughters to satisfy high caste animal lust. Laws are ineffective. 'The laws themselves harbour caste prejudices.'²⁶

The Constitution (article 338) provides for a Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. His task is to be the conscience of the nation in this vital and pressing task of the transformation of Indian society. But report after report of the Commission and Commissioner bear witness

23. Jain, L. C. : *ibid.*, pp 325, 327

26. Jain, L. C. : *art. cit.*, p. 327

to the helpless and pitiable level to which the political and administrative elite have reduced the status of this conscience-keeper. The annual reports of the Commissioner to the President of India are a record of his 'bewailings and beseechings'. The Commissioner is given neither personnel nor resources enough to do his work, and he is treated with indifference and contempt. "No fiction can excel the true stories of cruelty, sadism, rape and murder chronicled by the Commissioner State by State, year after year." The reports also list hundreds of examples of district officials, police officials, and higher authorities refusing to take firm and timely action in cases attracting provisions of the Protection of Civil Rights Act.²⁷

Caste and class

There is an intricate question of the relationship between caste and class. Caste is a burning issue to the ruling class who own land and capital, and employ labour of others and extract huge surplus. It is also a burning issue for those who toil and find that their work never wins them an adequate livelihood and that their own organised progress is hampered by the caste divisions and caste wars that exist among them.²⁸ Hence the debate about the relationship between caste and class; and the questioning of Marxist analysis of Indian society, which is accused of not taking socio cultural caste as seriously as it takes socio economic class. Hence also the discussion on the nature of culture and on the behaviour of superstructures.

We have already noted how, from the fact that the SCs are the lowest in the economic as well as the social hierarchy, we could affirm a certain direct correspondence between the two pyramids. It is agreed that "there is a certain amount of intermingling between the two factors class and caste. In the pre-capitalist society such as ours, caste is the main form through which class manifests itself".²⁹ Caste differs from class in socio-economic and political positions. Social scientists have established the existence of a strong correlation between caste on the one hand and income, education, occupational status and material possessions on the other. These are the four factors which make for social and political status and influence. Hence the further correspondence between caste on the one side and urbanisation, politicisation, as well as political power on the other. The higher the caste, the higher the education,

27. *id.*, art. cit., p. 328

35. EPW, February 1979, editorial, p. 223

36. Fernandez, A, : in *Indian Forum* I, March 1970, p. 23

the income, the occupation, etc. The upper castes constitute the social, economic, cultural and political elite in India. It is clear then that the socio economic hierarchy corresponds in general to the cast hierarchy. Thus the whole set-up is 'stacked against those whose position is low in the caste hierarchy'.³⁷ Further, the gap between the upper and the lower castes has considerably widened since British conquest and since independence due to new economic, political and educational opportunities which the upper castes alone could quickly seize; due also to new and unequal competition, and consequent uncertainty, all of which 'act primarily to the disadvantage of the underprivileged'.³⁸

As Kosambi points out, the status of castes in a given place is decided roughly by their relative economic power, so much so that if a caste family migrates to a distant place no caste status is automatically assigned to it. "The same caste may have different positions in the hierarchy for two different regions. If this differentiation persists for some time, the separate branches may often regard themselves as different castes, no longer intermarrying."³⁹ The poorest classes (in economic terms) are the lowest castes (in social terms). "On the local level the social and the economic aspects are hopelessly intertwined. The category of caste and class are interwoven and appear mutually to buttress each other. For all practical purposes . . . the poor are the scheduled castes and the scheduled castes are the poor."⁴⁰ India has expressed its classes in caste idiom. "Today's caste divisions are a carry-over of feudal class divisions. However underpinned caste divisions may be with heredity, ritual, cultural and pollution-conscious practice etc. for the majority of Indians, the material base in relation to land and extraction of surplus from the land is inescapable."⁴¹ As A. R. Kamath observes caste is a specific pre-capitalist Indian (Hindu) society which has "at all times served the dominant social strata as an instrument of economic exploitation, social discrimination

37. Bhatt, A. : *Caste, Class and politics : An Empirical Profile of Caste Classification in Modern India*, Delhi, 1974, p. 75, quoted by J. Maliekal, *Caste in India Today*.

38. Beteille, A. : *Studies in Agrarian Social Structure* 1974, p. 110; cf J. Maliekal, op. cit. pp. 29-30

39. Kosambi, D. D. : *Culture and Civilization of Ancient India*, 1965, p. 15

40. Juergensmeyer, art. cit. p. 255

41. Epw, February 1979, editorial p. 223

and cultural oppression".⁴² The vast majority of conflicts and killings relate to disputes over land and wages. The agrarian problem is basic to any discussion on caste and untouchability. Nor is the question of *izzat* or dignity and liberation from insult and sexual abuse unrelated to the people's economic status. A large number of attacks on Dalits originate in their refusal to continue to work as serfs, their demand for status of modern laborer on settled conditions of work, mobility of labour, fair wages etc.

Thus the class basis of caste is being uncovered. Both caste and class oppression are sustained by property relations which lie at the basis of the present socio-economic system. It is therefore "sheer deception to think of avoiding untouchability or caste with landlords and monopolists dominating the economy and bourgeois landlord government in power. The caste problem is inevitably merged with the problem of ending the rule of bourgeois landlord class and moving forward to socialism".⁴³ The 1968 C P I (M) memorandum had already pointed out that the social oppression and brutality in our rural areas "is the result of the growth of feudal and semi-feudal landlordism and of the 'new rich' on the same feudal caste and social basis, and of their grip over the village economy and life.... It is a reflection of the failure of the government to liquidate the medieval feudal economic bases,... to abolish landlordism, give the land to the tiller... Hence no wonder these atrocities are increasing and a terrible brutalisation of village life, negating all human values and decencies, is taking place... The democratic opinion and forces must assert and force the government to give up its present policy of using the state machinery in support of the village oppressor against the rural poor, against the Harijan and backward communities, but use it...against the vested interests and bring about radical, economic and social transformation in the rural side of our country".⁴⁴

We may then say that today it is agreed (i) that caste and class are interlocked realities, (ii) that caste has its basis in economics and relations of production and appropriation of surplus, (iii) that, though a superstructure, caste has its own life and logic and interacts dialectically with its material basis, and (iv) that therefore as much attention must be paid to the combat against caste as against class. We may even

42. Kamath, A. R. : "The Emerging situation," EPW February 1979, p. 354

43. Ranadive, B. T. : art. cit. EPW, February 1979, p. 348

44. Quoted by Ranadive in EPW, February, 1979, p. 339

have to deal with the paradox of using caste awareness and caste groupings in order to overcome caste and build up mass organisation of all the poor and the exploited across caste lines.

a) World-wide phenomenon

Indian caste system has unique features. But India is not the only place where caste like formations have taken shape. Social scientists remind us that "there are societies which have birth-ascribed social groups similar to Indian untouchables which are considered to be socially inferior through some permanent stigma".⁴⁵ Quasi-caste systems have occurred "wherever social strata have tended to evolve into closed endogamous groups".⁴⁶ The Blacks in the U.S.A., the Eta and the Hinin in Japan and certain blacksmith tribes in East Africa are mentioned as examples. Ancient Egyptians, Iranians and medieval Japanese evolved well known caste orders. The Prussian Junkers revealed many caste-like traits. The feudal division of medieval Europe resembled superficially the three *varṇas* of the R̥gveda. The nobility, a military aristocracy charged with defence and judicial power, would correspond to Kṣatriyas; the clergy, an intellectual and literary elite looking after people's spiritual needs and important administrative functions, would resemble the brahmins; the peasantry, whose principal social obligation was to labour for the support of the nobility and the clergy who dominated the feudal hierarchy, would be the early *vaiśyas*. After the 12th century entrance into the nobility was only through birth or through royal grace which was rarely given. Higher clerical offices were pre-empted by the younger sons of noble families. Church hierarchy was closed to all who were not of noble birth.⁴⁷ As divine legitimation was claimed for *varṇa* so was divine dispensation claimed for medieval European hierarchy. R. H. Tawny quotes a medieval 'theologist' who divided the church into three parts: preachers, defenders and laborers; and argued that "if one took the service of another and left his own *proper* work" that

45. Juergensmeyer, M. art. cit. 255

46. Meyer, K. E. and Buckley, W. : *Class and Society*, N. Y., 1969, p. 14 quoted by Ajit Roy, EPW February 1979, p. 301

47. Roy, H. : 'Caste and Class : An Interlinked View', in EPW. February 1979 - pp. 301-307; Julio de santa Ana : *Good News to the poor*, Ny, 1979, p. 88

would be disservice, contrary to what Christ has *ordained*.⁴⁸ Such thoughts were repeated as late as 1903 by no less a personality than Pope Pius X who wrote: "In the order of human society *as established by God* there are rulers and ruled, employers and employees, rich and poor, learned and ignorant, nobility and the proletariat."⁴⁹ Even today such ideas have only been partially overcome among Christians. The March 29, 1980 number of the periodical *America* carries some personal testimonies of mainly Black experience of racism.

The social order in Palestine in the time of Jesus exhibited features comparable to some of the characteristic traits of India's caste system. It was a hierarchical order descending from a sacred and secular ruling aristocracy at the top through a powerful upper class, also secular and religious, to the poorer masses of peasants, pliers of low and despised trades, the indebted, the unemployed and the slaves. Much in this hierarchy was determined by birth, much by profession and much too by notions of ritual purity and pollution.⁵⁰

2. The mind of Jesus

Friend of the outcaste

With a firm hand Jesus set aside the entire system of taboos based on ideas of purity and pollution of races, contacts and occupations. He associated with outcasts of every sort: publicans, prostitutes, lepers, Samaritans, the common working class people; he asked no questions about payment of tithes or observance of purity rules. He touched the lepers and let prostitutes and women with hemorrhage touch him. He sat in the homes of tax collectors and sinners, with those whose moral conduct or disreputable profession made them ritually unclean and socially outcast. He ate with them and made them welcome in his own home, to the horror and anger of Pharisees. In disregard of a whole tradition of treating Samaritans as untouchables. Jesus asks for and accepts water from a Samaritan woman. Taking food and water with or from untouchables is the last contamination for a caste man in

48. Tawney, R. H. : *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, 1948, pp. 37-38

49. Pius X : *Motu proprio Fin Dalla Prima* on popular Catholicism, in *All Things in Christ* : Encyclicals and selected documents of saint Pius X, 1954, p. 208

50. Jeremias, J. *Jerusalem in the time of Jesus*, 1969

our country. That is what Jesus would do, were he here, defying social traditions and religious sanctions. We would normally have to look for him in the huts of Dalits, in the colonies of outcastes outside the village. It is from among the poor, the working class, the outcasts and the sinners that he gathers his disciples and close circle of friends. He thinks that the social rejects, the rejected stones, are the best foundations for a finer future for our world. In his situation and in ours, his behaviour was, and would be, subversive, disruptive of the old caste infected mind-set and social fabric; and constructive of a new order of free and equal people. Jesus comes as a new wine pouring itself into the old wine-skins of our stupid prejudices and heartless traditions in order to explode them and make room for the new world which free and equal men and women can create. By associating with the outcast he set them free by recognizing their humanity, acknowledging their dignity and affirming their worth. He awakened their selfhood, rebuilt their pride and assured them of their status as Daughters, Sons and Citizens before God. He challenged them to live accordingly in open freedom and to refuse every enslavement.

The ideology of spiritual superiority and holier *Karma* yielding high caste birth is held up to ridicule. Its hollowness is exposed without pity. Two men went up to the temple to pray. One was a pure upper caste man, the other a polluting *candāla*. The pure caste man told God how good he was, how much better than the other man, for unlike the other he knew the Vedas, recited the mantras and revered brahmins. The candala stood far away outside the temple precincts, bowed his head, beat his breast and confessed himself an impure outcast due to his evil Karma and sought God's mercy. This man God befriended, said Jesus; not the other. Everyone who exalts himself and considers himself spiritually superior, karma-wise higher and caste-wise upper, is, in God's estimate, of low human quality and least promising for the future of the earth. The promises are with those who have known the cruelty of caste and the pain of class oppression and are therefore capable of dreaming a new and different dream for humankind. The promises are with those who opt to suffer and struggle with and for the deprived, despised and rejected outcastes; the pulaya, the paraya, the chamar, the wankar, the kurava, the veda, the bhangi, the musahar, the dusadh.⁵⁷

57. Lk 18 : 9-14; 14 : 11 ; Mtt 23 : 12; 20:6

That is why Jesus said: "Tax collectors and prostitutes are making their way into the Kingdom of God before you", Pharisees. They receive in faith and hope the good news Jesus is announcing. It is in fact to the poor, the lame and the cripple, to those who are supposed to have an evil Karma, that the good news is directed, offered, given. It is to the little ones, the unlearned and the simple that the Father reveals his heart and his best wishes for our world. From the erudite and clever scribes and from the rich and powerful aristocracy God keeps these things hidden.⁵⁸ The little ones are the socially powerless and defenceless, who have no status and do not count and who are not allowed the freedom which is everybody's birthright. And significantly, in the Lukan infancy narratives, it is the most despised of outcasts, the shepherds, that are chosen to be the first to hear and see what kings and prophets have longed in vain to hear and see.

Inversion

The last shall be first. Reversal is a major theme of the New Testament. Even before the call of the shepherds is narrated, Luke presents, in the Song of Mary, a succinct theology of subversion which then overarches the rest of the story till the Crucified is appointed Lord and Lifegiver. In this Song, sung by a working class woman whose son was oppressed and killed by the ruling class for the stand he took on behalf of the outcast masses of the people, God is shown as standing the world on its head and turning the social order upside down. God is one who dethrones the ruling classes and high castes, and puts the Dalits in charge of history. God brushes the aristocracy aside and concerns himself with the wretched of the earth. God and history bypass those who make a dash for seats of honour, or rush to reserve for themselves seats of prestige and power in the kingdom, or start a dispute as to who is the greatest, noblest, holiest, or high caste. We disputed among ourselves furiously in Kerala, in Tamilnadu, in Gujarat, in Bihar. Jesus called a paraya and a chamar and said, If you do not become converted to the side these little ones and the promise they hold, you shall never see your humanity completed. They brought some bhangis and dusadhs to Jesus, and we the upper caste said, No, do not educate them, educate us; do not give them land, they will pollute it, give it all to us. Jesus was angry and he said.... But who heard what he said?

When therefore you give a party for the wedding of your dentist son, on the occasion of your ordination as priest, or the anniversary of your episcopal consecration, or the golden jubilee of your profession as religious, do not invite all the priests and brahmins, the commissioners and the collectors and the well fed neighbours and silked and scented angels: but "invite the poor, the (socially and physically) crippled, the lame, the blind", those who cannot invite you back, who are not allowed to draw water from the village well nor to wash and clothe themselves decently.⁵⁹ To welcome a little outcaste is to welcome me, says Jesus, is to welcome God. Hard saying, surely; rude and offensive language; unacceptable. But that is what Jesus is saying.

Demolition of a myth

The myth of pure ancestry too is unmasked. Even if the claim to biological purity of blood were true and demonstrable, what human value does it have for history and what spiritual value in the sight of God? When a crowd sitting around told him that his mother and brothers were standing outside and asking for him, Jesus made a reply which carries a profound challenge to anybody, Hindu or Christian, who thinks in terms of purity of race or nobility of birth. Anyone who does God's will is, to Jesus, brother and sister and mother. The given, the biological-natural is set aside and transcended. The historical commitment to the doing of God's will on this earth alone counts as a basis of relationship to Jesus and to God. In such historical commitment to overcome what is anti human and to build up people from their physical material basis upward, all the oppressed and outcastes can cross the dividing lines created by erroneous thinking and socio religious mystifications, and can unite in God's kingdom as God's family sharing his Bread of life.⁶⁰

In John 8, the Jews decline the offer of freedom Jesus makes through the gift of his word and truth. They decline it on the ground that as descendants of Abraham they have always been free. Once more Jesus shifts the argument from the plane of natural relationship to the plane of historical relationship. Only those are Abraham's true descendants who stand in the line of Abraham's obedience to the will of God.

59. Lk 14 : 7-11; Mk 9 : 33-37; 10 : 35-40; Lk 9 : 46 48; 1:51; 16:15

60. Mk 3:31-35 together with Mtt 25:36-46, and Mtt 6:9-13

The Jews who were seeking to kill Jesus because of his obedience to God in serving God's dispossessed and crippled people, could not be Abraham's sons but the devil's.

We must appreciate the fact that it was not easy for the early christians to understand and follow the mind of Jesus; nor is it easy for us. A clear enough grasp of his mind after his death is presented in the Acts as a fresh and shocking revelation. One noon, Peter, hungry and looking forward to his meal, had a vision of all sorts of animals, accompanied with a word that bade him kill and eat. He refused: he had never eaten anything unclean and profane. We know that here the animals refer symbolically not to food and to people. Jesus had indicated that food had nothing to do with the goodness or badness of the human heart. It is words and actions that spring from the heart that spell out the quality of the human. Jesus had also befriended and moved with people generally considered impure. The point Jesus makes is that God has made and declared all men and women pure. And now Peter lands on the same conviction. "You know it is forbidden for Jews to mix with people of another race and visit them but God has made it clear to me that I must not call *anyone* profane or unclean.... The truth that I have now come to realise is that God has no favorites, but that anybody of any nationality who fears God and *does* what is right is acceptable to him."⁶³ This christian position cuts the root of casteism and racism and inaugurates an open universal history.

Breaking the culture of silence

Like all oppression caste also creates and imposes a culture of silence. The outcastes may not only not complain of torture, exploitation and rape, they may not speak at all. S. K. Datta-Ray reports: "...the Dusadhs... received us in sullen silence, for every single question that I put to them - name, age, occupation, wage or extent of official assistance - was promptly taken up by the voluble Sarpanch who replied each time at great length, then turned round to Harijan onlookers and again interpreted their silence as acquiescence. Not one single word would they - or could they - utter".⁶⁷ People are prevented from talking, from expressing their dissent or their creativity,

63. Acts, chapters 10 and 11,

67. Datta-Ray, S.K.: "World's Oldest Form of Apartheid", in *Himmatt*, April 15, 1981 p. 20.

from singing their own songs or telling their own story. A significant part of Jesus' work was an attack upon this culture. He loved to touch the eyes, the ears and the tongues of the blind and the deaf mute to unlock them and enable them to see reality, to hear people's cries and to speak up. Dumbness is often linked to demon possession. It is when people are possessed, owned, bonded, enslaved and oppressed by satanic social forces and their human agents that they lose their identity and their name lose their vision or have their eyes punctured and sealed, lose the use of their mind and their tongue. Jesus breaks into such situations with exorcism and liberation followed by the sound of new human voices rising in protest, claiming rights affirming life and celebrating community. This was Jesus' praxis of liberative education, and it poses questions to our practice. The vital question is: Whom are we equipping with word and voice, and with what social results?

The prayer

The prayer Jesus taught is the prayer of the human family. It is inconceivable that the Lord's Prayer could fit into any kind of caste class-racist structure of the mind or of the social order. The prayer will either disrupt and sweep aside such mentalities and social arrangements, or it will itself be rejected and emptied of meaning and used merely as a caste mark. But Jesus surely intended the prayer to be an image of the new world of his dreams in freedom and fraternity. He meant it to be a programme of action towards the realisation of that dream, and a stimulus to commitment and a transforming power. We can experience God as our Father and his name as holy and meaningful only when we do his will here and now, by sharing bread and all resources, socialising and interdining in the fullest and deepest sense these words can bear, and accepting one another in mutual forgiveness for all past pride and folly, fragmentation and division into caste and class.

A lowly slave : an outcaste

We must pass beyond what Jesus taught and stood for. We must consider what he *became* in our world and is becoming now. In our society, infected by caste and class, Jesus becomes a slave, an oppressed person, an outcaste. An ancient christian hymn, which Paul quotes, speaks of Jesus as emptying himself of high, divine, status and glory, and assuming the condition of the lowliest in his society, living at that level the weakness of our earthly existence, and accepting death by

crucifixion, the ignominious death of criminal and slave. In our language we would say, he refused to grasp at power, prestige, privilege and profit; he refused to side with the votaries of these. Instead he chose to be a Dalit, a Paraya, the lowest among the outcastes. And as such he was wantonly insulted, harassed and killed by the landlords' hirelings. Is such language offensive? We know that the proclamation of a crucified Messiah and of salvation through the cross has always been a scandal to the Jews and stupidity to the Greeks. To those who have faith, however, the outcast Jesus and his humiliated people are God's saving wisdom and power. It is these God raises on high. To them he gives a name, who are nameless now. In their hands he places our history and in the heart of their death he lets our earth's future unfold.⁶⁸

The rejected stone

The many million destitutes of our country, almost half of India's population and the untouchables in particular together with the deprived tribes, the bonded laborers, and the prisoners of our jails and brothels are the rejects of society. The rejection of most of them is structural and permanent; and it is renewed daily, thus increasing and refining the cruelty of our ancient exploitative system. These human beings are used daily for profit and pleasure and daily discarded. The experience of rejection, central to their lives, is central to the life of Jesus too, so much so that the Fourth Gospel decided to include it among the main themes he programmed in his prologue: 'He came to his own domain and his own people did not accept him.' The Synoptics too emphasise this theme from the start. Jesus came to his home town where he had been brought up, and taught in the synagogue, but the people would not accept him. They found him too ordinary; they knew "this is the carpenter, surely"; they knew his mother, his brothers and his sisters. At one point in their discussion with him, "they sprang to their feet and hustled him out of the town", intending to throw him down a precipice and end him. Jesus was deeply affected by this rejection. He could work no miracles there. He reflected that a prophet is only despised in his own country and his own house. 'I have come in the name of my Father and you refuse to accept me', he said to the Jews. "So they seized him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard" is a line in one of his parables, and it is likely that in his mind he was himself this

68. Philippians 2:5-11.

killed and thrown out son. For immediately afterwards he recalls a word from a Psalm about "the stone rejected by the builders that became the keystone"⁷⁴. To the early christians, surely, Jesus was the Rejected Stone which God picked up and made the foundation of humanity's future. The faith of Philippians 2:5-11 is alive here too. The murdered slave is the one God chooses and builds upon. The oppressors the killers, the slave drivers, the big eaters, and the pretenders to high purity have no future, have no key role in the unfolding of history; they are consigned to the past, "they have had their reward", they have had their good things and their fling⁷⁵. It is the oppressed Jesus, matured in the fire of his passion-baptism, and the outcaste people, tempered and baked in the fires and flames of prolonged suffering that will become the keybricks of God's new creation, the new earth of free and equal people where justice will flow like the Ganga and the Amazon and experience of God will be not like private ponds but like the waters that cover the sea. This is what God is working at now. And as his building rises, and his outcaste people uprise and the dead are bidden back to life, our eyes shall marvel. Great surprises are surely in store for us, but already a summons is reaching us, bidding us to join God where he is gathering the rejected stone and laying the foundations of a human future⁷⁶.

Outside the camp

Rejected and thrown out of the vineyard and out of the town, Jesus finds himself outside the walls where the untouchables too are forced to live and suffer. He finds himself among the "external groups", those pushed out of society and excluded from its wealth and culture which, however, they have worked in the main to create. "So Jesus suffered outside the gate to sanctify the people with his own blood."⁷⁷ This is a New Testament witness of special interest and relevance to our situation. In Jewish worship (which, being a costly affair, only the well-to-do could afford in its full form and splendour), animal blood was brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for the atonement of sin, while the bodies of the slaughtered animals were burnt "outside the camp". The "camp" in

74. Jn 1:11; 5:43; Lk 4:16-30; Mk 6:1-6; 12:1-11; Ps 118:22-23.

75. Mk 6:2; Lk 16:19-25.

76. Mk 12:10-11; Acts 4:11; I Pt 2:7.

77. Hebrews 13:11-12.

NT times meant Jerusalem⁷⁸. It meant the establishment. It stood for the power of the nobility and the orthodoxy of the religious elite. It represented what was deemed sacred, pure and favoured by God. That is why carcasses which caused defilement had to be taken outside the city and burnt. Now the christian witness is that Jesus in his suffering life and death does not belong with the holy city, its nobility, purity and orthodoxy. He belongs to the realm outside of these: he belongs to the region of carcasses and of defilement which is a realistic description of the life of many an outcaste group. See for instance the documentary film, "They Call Me Chamar" with its revoltingly realistic scenes of carcasses and vultures among which Chamars live to eke out a miserable existence. That is where Jesus belongs. He suffered as an outcaste, cast out of Jerusalem as a polluting carcass, as a blasphemer, a sinner, a seducer, a breaker of sacred traditions and purity laws, a friend of publicans and harlots.

Jesus suffered outside the camp in order to disclose, proclaim and affirm the inborn dignity and the native purity of all outcast(e)s. He does it through sharing of life with them sharing in the affront of which they are objects and the stigma attached to their birth. He does it by pouring out his blood, his life and self, in liberating service on their behalf. From Jesus' riskful options and commitments come courage, hope and inspiration to the social outcasts, the political nothings and the victims of our economic system. Jesus' blood was never brought into the city, its sanctuary or its orthodoxy. "Therefore it would not cleanse the people inside the city; but it would 'sanctify the people' who were outside the city"⁷⁹. All who would, then, participate in the freeing and life-giving love and struggle of Jesus will have to seek him outside the city, where he is with the lost, the lowliest and the least. "Let us then go to him outside the camp and share his degradation." With Jesus we go out of the old cities and establishments of self-righteous poses, frozen orthodoxies and oppressive power. We go out of debasing conceptions about God and humans, and about untouchables and touchables. We quit the old bastions of religious legitimization for antihuman economic and political systems. In fact we leave behind all the ancient religiosities with their temples

78. Buchanan, G.W. : Epistle to the Hebrews, Anchor Bible, ad loc.

79. *ibid.*, *ibid.*

sacrifices and priests, with their arrogance and ambiguities and "almighty gods" and go to join Jesus outside the camp to discover in him a new, surprising God outcaste and crucified.

Became flesh

In the light of all this, the witness of the Fourth Gospel about God's Word becoming flesh takes on new significance. In biblical tradition flesh may mean the body, the soul, the heart or the human being; it can denote all living creatures no less than humanity itself. But every time these realities are called flesh an accent falls on their weakness, fragility, and transitoriness⁸². Flesh or flesh and blood may mean also various natural relationships⁸³. This use suggests the social nature of 'flesh', which can therefore connote corporate personality. Flesh carries the idea of special social bonds with the weak brother, as in Isaiah 58:7, to clothe the man you see to be naked and not turn from your own flesh (kin). Thus flesh also comes to signify sensitivity, the opposite of hardness and stubbornness, the ability to register and respond to human or divine reality. One of God's great promises is to remove from our bodies the heart of stone and give us a heart of flesh instead⁸⁴. Caste is a heart of stone. Jesus has a heart of flesh. He is flesh, sensitivity and loving compassion, carrying in his corporate personality all flesh, all who are weak and vulnerable, the powerless multitude of the wretched of the earth. That is what the Word of God became flesh.

The self-emptying and the scandal consist not so much in that the Word became a human being (*anthropos*), or that the revealer is a man, but that the Word became a powerless, rejected human being, flesh (*sarx*), and that this outcast being is the disclosure of a suffering and oppressed God who is one with the untouchables and outcastes of all times everywhere. Flesh in John's prologue is not only a theological word; it is a sociological term giving historical content to theology. There are no socially neutral human beings in history; human beings are ruling or ruled classes, agents or victims of injustice, and high or low caste or outcaste. John is here expressing the same thought as Paul expresses in Philippians 2 and 2 Corin-

82. I Kings 2:27; Ps. 6:1; : 84:2 136:25 Isaiah 40:5 - 7
Gn 6:12,16; Mt 24:22; Mk 13:20

83. Gn 2:23 woman; Gn 2:24 family; Judg 9:2 township;
Ro 1:13; 9:3; 11:14.

84. Ezek 11:19; 36:26

thians 8. The word was made flesh; Christ made himself poor; he assumed the condition of a slave. Matthew's witness to the same truth is had in his story of the Magi where Jesus is, from the start, a condemned person and a refugee. Luke's symbols for the same faith are the manger in which the infant Jesus was laid because there was no room in the inn, and the poverty of his temple presentation, and the prophecy about his rejection and his mother's anguish. John too frames the flesh-becoming of the Word in the context of rejection. His basic witness may then be rendered in our context thus: And the Word was made an outcaste, a *candāla*, a *paraya*; he lives in the *jhuggis* outside the village, and in the hovels in the slums of our city; we have experienced his presence and his greatness, the unique greatness of God's son which consists in the authentic graciousness of identifying himself with the wretched of the earth and the judgement passed thereby on the power structures which so degrade the children of God.

When therefore Jesus presses us to eat his flesh and drink his blood, or briefly to eat him⁸⁵, his meaning may go beyond acceptance of his revelation and beyond ritual eucharistic practices. It may mean further and more pointedly, the necessity of assimilating vitally and making our own (as we make our own the food we eat and the drink we take) his entire Person and his mind and heart as enfleshed or embodied in his historical-social options: the necessity of identifying ourselves with his powerless and rejected outcast condition; of living and struggling with and for the millions to whom life is scarcely permitted, whose 'bread of life' is daily taken away, and who are massacred and burnt at the slightest sign they show of movement, growth or dignity. Jesus made their cause his own and worked so that they might have life and have it in all its abounding fullness. In his commitment he becomes their bread of life. In so doing he discovered the living Father who is one with the oppressed and who through them moves history forward. John 6 is telling us in graphic, compelling words what Hebrews said when it summoned us to go to him outside the camp, sharing his insult. There we shall identify ourselves with his and his people's defencelessness, outcasteness, fleshness, and with him and them pour out our lives too in liberating action.

Sharing his insult

The insult heaped on Jesus is symbol of the permanent load of insult to which the poor and the untouchables are subjected in our society. When Jesus declared sins forgiven the scribes said he was blaspheming. That accusation will be repeated again on various grounds. When he mingled with the common people and the working class and tax collectors, he was criticised and implicitly charged with defilement. If he did not fast according to rule and custom, as in fact he did not, he was questioned and required to explain himself. And not grasping his answers, his critics called him a glutton and a drunkard. For pointing out the human meaning of the sabbath and using it to make broken people whole, he was threatened with annihilation⁸⁶. When Jesus freed people from the grip of alienating forces and evil spirits he was painted as a black magic man in truck with Satan. His enemies never scrupled to hurt him with calumnies. They said Jesus himself was possessed by unclean spirits. "You are a Samaritan" they said, 'and possessed by a devil'. We know for certain that you are possessed".⁸⁷. They plagued him with tricky questions to test him, hoping to catch him out in some unguarded word he might utter, and questioned his credentials for acting as freely as he did. The rulers despised Jesus as an untrained rabbi, and objected to him as an irregular teacher who had received no instruction from any recognized master⁸⁸. The crowd, however, was divided in their estimate of Jesus. Some said, He is a good man. Others said, No, he is leading the people astray. And many said, He is raving, and called him a mad man.⁸⁹ And finally the Pharisees declared Jesus a sinner and an imposter. The case of Jesus is but an example of calculated insults and false charges the established system hurls at the socially defenceless in order to repress them when they begin to express new thoughts and suggest changes in social and property relations. The experience of the outcastes and the experience of Jesus coincide. In them Jesus is still being insulted persecuted, and tortured.

86. Mk 2:5-7, 15-17; 18 19; 23 28; 3:1-6. Mt 11:18 19.

87. Mk 3:22-30; Jn 8:48-52.

88. Jn 7:14-18; Brown, R. op. cit. I, p. 316.

89. Jn 7:11-12; 7:20; 10:19

Godforsaken

The high point of such coincidence of experience is the experience of godforsakenness. The history of the Dalits gives little or no evidence of God's love, concern, justice, presence or existence. The dispossessed outcastes of India have known no god who is *sat-chit-ananda*, who is good, awake or blissful, who is truthful, thoughtful and hopegiving. They have been dominated and destroyed by utterly heartless and cruel gods. They are determined to wipe all such gods off the face of the earth: all Molochs and Mammons who fatten on human life and establish their thrones on human helplessness and misery. And in that Jesus is their ally. A major part of Jesus' service is work for the abolition of all antihuman gods, all those monsters which are more interested in magnificent temples for themselves with elaborate priesthoods and expensive sacrifices rather than in the plight of slaves, the dignity of outcastes: land for the landless, food and tenderness for children and hope of a more human future for all.

In the historical experience of godlessness which is common to all the oppressed, Jesus shares. In the last hour of his life, as he hung on the cross, rejected by his people, he realized that the God he had loved and served all his days, in whose name he had spoken and taken sides had now abandoned him; and he cried out: "My God, my God, why have you deserted me"? Nothing less than that anguished cry can represent the experience of India's millions of untouchables. Within that experience all the classical, traditional ideas of god die and disappear. Good riddance: for the old gods and religions have to go or be abolished for their crimes against the Harijans. These gods are unworthy and incapable of the future of the outcastes. But within this barren godlessness the lineaments of a new divine Face begin to show, the Face of the Crucified God, the oppressed God of the oppressed, whose very agony undermines and shatters the thrones of Powers and Dominations. There, in the heart of death and triumphant injustice, a fresh hope sprouts the vision of a new earth founded on equality and freedom and love. That means in the heart of godlessness a new faith comes to birth. The atheism of Jesus was the place of a new revelation, the womb of a new faith. So it is now here in India with the godlessness the Dalits experience. That is why we must leave the old behind and go out to him and to them outside the camp sharing in their degradation no less than in their godforsakenness, but with the unspeakable hope of being met by the Father who raised Jesus from the dead and made this outcast the promise of the earth and the leader of its history.

3. The task

Conversion

The fact that Jesus is one of the oppressed and God in him is made an outcast pleads with our hearts to be converted from caste practices and be cleansed of caste mentality and caste feel. Let that mind and spirit be ours which was Jesus'

'who did not cling to his equality with God

but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave''.

Jesus chose to be an outcaste not to approve the system, not to legitimate *Varṇa* nor to give it any divine sanction. Quite the contrary. Jesus became one with outcastes in order to awaken them to the fact that he was challenging the system, to enable them to join him in setting aside the rules, to create within their own mutual relationships an exchange of recognition, affirmation and honour, to show them how God was with them, to stimulate them to discover the revolutionary meaning with which their suffering was replete and to summon them to stand together on the basis of their shared suffering in order to say a clear 'No' to oppression, relativise all human powers, authorities, rituals and laws and stand as a sign of the liberation God wills for the people.' The method of Jesus is not sidereal but incarnational; not metaphysical - absolute - idealist but concrete - historical - social. He works from within the situation that is to be transformed.

Revolution

In thus challenging the existing social order and in working for its radical transformation, we are only linking up with and re-inforcing meaningful historical movements within the country. Throughout Indian history protest movements against caste have been frequent. "These rebel sects", says M. N. Srinivas, "rejected the idea of brahminical supremacy, the performance of elaborate rituals and the punctilious observance of rules of pollution and purity, and they instead emphasised the love of God and right conduct as indispensable to salvation. It is not surprising that protest sects attracted followers from a wide range of castes from rebel brahmins to untouchables . . . Caste and anti-caste are both parts of a single phenomenon and those who wish to root the idea of human dignity and equality in Indian soil would do well to go to these historical sources of protest and build on them."⁹²

92. Srinivas, M. N. "Future of Indian Caste", EPW Feb. 1979, p. 238. Historical protest movements call for a different

Solidarity with the downtrodden is an essential constituent of the christian church. It is in choosing to be identified with them that the coming Kingdom is discerned, met and served. It is in their life, suffering and struggles sincerely shared, that we can meet Jesus in his contemporary life. Without participation in their pain we scarcely keep the memory of the Lord's death in the scriptures and in the Eucharist. For the untouchables are the passion of Jesus. They are the Good Friday we grieve over with reverence and hope. They are the crucifixion of the Son of Man, the Son of God, today. No christian faith is possible in India today without identification with them and commitment to their Resurrection from the tombs in which they are now held guarded by the musclemen of the ruling castes and classes according to the law and otherwise. "Let us then go to him and to them, outside the camp, bearing his and their shame", instead of running after those whom God shuns, those who use their power, science, religion and high birth to oppress, enslave and then legitimize it all. That these great ones were bypassed by the Jesus movement in its earliest formation and in its life for some two to three centuries is a fact to be pondered; it is of theological significance and of practical consequence.

"By the deliberate act of God these people (outcastes) were called to become the core of the world's greatest redemptive revolution. The existing things, including people 'of substance', were nullified precisely by these despised nothings."⁹³

The language of the cross

The untouchables and the destitutes of our country are the crucifixion expressed. The suffering of the outcastes is immense. It can break them completely and crush their spirits. But it can also be a healthening and strengthening experience, historically necessary to build up the unity, vitality and courage of the oppressed as a whole. Historically, providentially, their suffering is the fire in which the bricks of tomorrow's finer society are baking, in which its steel is tempering. The signs are that this precisely is happening. Suffering has been matu-

meditation. Basis for it may be found in. Maliekal, J.: *Caste in India*, 1981, pp. 54-80; Dietrich, G.: *Culture, Religion and Development*, 1980, pp. 36-39. Thomas, M. M.: *The Secular Ideologies of India and the Secular Meaning of Christ*, Madras, 1976, pp. 124-156. Rao, M.S.A.: *Social Movements and Social Transformation* 1979, pp. 10-11 Lieten, Ranadive, Ram, Pandit in EPW, Feb 1979, pp. 321-323 343-345, 377-401, 429-431.

93. Orr. W.E. and Walther, J.A.R.: I Corinthians, Anchor Bible, 1976, p. 161.

ring the oppressed who no longer see their plight as intractable fate but as human creation, something therefore which they can tackle, and use, and forge into a sword with which to sever the chains that hold them in bondage. How do we christians and our organised churches view and relate to the sufferings of outcaste people? How do we relate to their new awareness and to their firmness of purpose and the dangerous forward steps they are taking? Are we anxious at the prospects of losing material for proselytism for christianity? Or at the prospects of a revolution which will sweep away our bourgeois institutions and the bourgeois culture in which we nestle? Or are we glad at their liberation which is at hand? and ready to repent, and receive the good news, and support their struggle, and underscore the Christ-meaning of their suffering?

Action

Biblical thought which shocks us by confronting us with a God who is one with outcastes has consequences for social practice. It summons us to press for fundamental alterations in patterns of social relations, and therefore in relations of production, in ownership of land, in industrial policies, in the designing of national education, in the distribution of social power. It is within action for such changes and the resultant beginnings of new relations that God's will is done and his Reign keeps coming.

The resources of the church, however limited, precisely because they are limited, have to be mobilized for the service, defence, sensitising and organising of the most deprived and despised sectors of the population. It has to muster up all its faith-resources to make a clear preferential option for the outcaste, and withdraw from institutions, commitments and services which consolidate the class and caste structure of a repressive and unjust social tradition. We need to gather all our spiritual strength to stand by the Crucified in the conflictual situation which his Gospel creates without anxiety about minority status, or the future of proselytism, or acceptance by upper castes and classes. We believe that the Cross is the place where the new humanity begins to bud. It is the Cross of the outcaste that bears the promise of the new earth and the new India with a human heart, a heart of flesh, full of *karuṇā*, sensitive to the all-encompassing *Brahman*, and realizing *advaita* and brotherliness at all levels of life and relationships.

വർണ്ണവും ജാതിയും

വർണ്ണവ്യവസ്ഥയും ജാതിവ്യവസ്ഥയും ഒരേ അർത്ഥത്തിലാണ് പ്രയോഗിക്കപ്പെടാറ്. എന്നാൽ വർണ്ണവും ജാതിയും അങ്ങനെയല്ല. നിഷ്കൃഷ്ടമായ അർത്ഥത്തിൽ വർണ്ണം നാലേയുള്ളൂ: ബ്രാഹ്മണ ക്ഷത്രിയ വൈശ്യ ശൂദ്രർ. ജാതി അസംഖ്യമുണ്ട്, ഓരോ വർണ്ണത്തിനകത്തു പുറത്തും. ചാതുർവർണ്യത്തിനു പുറത്തുള്ള ജാതികളാണ് അവർണ്ണർ (outcastes).

എല്ലാ മനുഷ്യരും ദൈവത്തിന്റെ പുത്രന്മാരും പുത്രിമാരുമാണെന്നും അങ്ങനെ മനുഷ്യവംശം മുഴുവൻ ഒരു സാഹോദര്യമാണെന്നുമുള്ള ക്രൈസ്തവ പഠനത്തിനു കടകവിരുദ്ധമായൊരു സങ്കല്പവും സംവിധാനവുമാണ് വർണ്ണവ്യവസ്ഥ അവതരിപ്പിക്കുക. അതിനെ ഈശ്വര പരിപേക്ഷമണിയിക്കാൻ മനുസ്മൃതി കീണഞ്ഞു പരിശ്രമിക്കുന്നതു നോക്കൂ: * “ബ്രഹ്മാവു ബ്രാഹ്മണനെയും ക്ഷത്രിയനെയും വൈശ്യനെയും ശൂദ്രനെയും യഥാക്രമം തന്റെ നാഭിയിലും കൈകളിലും അരയിലും പാദങ്ങളിലും നിന്നു സൃഷ്ടിച്ചു” (1: 31). അവർക്ക് പ്രത്യേകം പ്രത്യേകം നിറവും കടമകളും തൊഴിലുകളും ഉണ്ട്. അവരിൽ ശൂദ്രക്ക് ഈശ്വരൻ വിധിച്ചിരിക്കുന്നതെന്താണെന്നല്ലേ? “മറ്റു മൂന്നു വർണ്ണികളെയും, പ്രത്യേകിച്ചു ബ്രാഹ്മണരെയും, സേവിക്കുക” (1: 91) അതു മാത്രം.

പിന്നെ ചാതുർവർണ്യത്തിനു പുറത്തുള്ളവരുടെ കാര്യം പറയാനുണ്ടോ? ഇവർ ബ്രഹ്മാവിന്റെ ശരീരാവയവങ്ങളിൽനിന്നു ജനിച്ചവരേയല്ല. ഇവർ ഹീനജാതികളാണ്, സവർണ്ണർ അറയ്ക്കുന്ന ഹീന തൊഴിൽ ചെയ്യാൻ വിധിക്കപ്പെട്ടവർ. പൊട്ടിയ പാത്രങ്ങളിൽ നിന്നുവേണം ഇവർ ഭക്ഷിക്കാൻ; ധരിക്കേണ്ടതോ, മരിച്ചവരുടെ വസ്ത്രങ്ങൾ. ഇവരുടെ ഏക രക്ഷാ മാർഗ്ഗം “പ്രതിഫലേച്ഛ കൂടാതെ ബ്രാഹ്മണർക്കും പശുക്കൾക്കും വേണ്ടി..... മരിക്കുകയോവു” (10: 62).

ആരാണ് പമ്പര വിവഹം? ഇത്തരം അസംബന്ധം ഈശ്വര വിധിയെന്നു വിശ്വസിക്കാൻ ഒരുമ്പെട്ടവരോ, എല്ലാം തലയിലൊഴുത്തു വിശ്വസിച്ചു നരകയാതനകൾ അനുഭവിച്ചവരോ?